

My Bloody Academia

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"Permanence, perseverance and persistence in spite of all obstacles, Discouragements, and impossibilities: It is this, that in all things distinguishes the strong soul from the weak." Thomas Carlyle

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Chapter 1

*Author's Note #1: Kept you waiting, huh? It's been a while. No, I'm not dead. Not now, is a story I've been working on. As some of you might've expected, it's a Kill la Kill crossover with My Hero Academia. As some of you on FFN might not expect, it's not my second crossover, but the third. The second was a Kingdom Hearts crossover - Don't Lose Your Heart - which you can find on spacebattles. As for **this** story, there's quite a bit to it. So, if you're interested, head on over to spacebattles for forty plus chapters plus interludes, omakes and general nonsense. I'll try to upload five or so chapters a day. Which is a lot. Alright, as for the background, it's My Hero Academia, which means Life Fibers don't exist. Just Quirks. Lots and lots of Quirks. Some Quirks that could (and do) put Life Fibers to shame. Like One for All. You think Senketsu turning Ryuko's skin as hard as steel would allow her tank a California Smash? Unlikely. I'm not going to say much about the plot, but Ryuko's 14 years old at the start of the story. Of course, just because we're not in Kill la Kill doesn't mean **nothing** familiar happens.*

My Bloody Academia

A finger tapped against the metal table, its rhythm breaking the monotonous silence permeating the ten-by ten room. His right sleeve was rolled halfway up his arm. A pen, dark blue ink staining its nose, bounced between his fingers, leaving small dots on the pages strewn in front of him. The clock on the wall, bolted behind steel mesh, ticked relentlessly, seconds evolving into minutes until another quarter of an hour passed.

It was almost midnight.

Twelve hours, yet no close to getting answers.

Another minute passed before Tsumugu Kinagase rubbed the bridge of his nose. He was exhausted. And the tension headache building between his eyes wasn't helping. But slouched across the table, grooved pupils silhouetted against cerulean narrowing and showing no signs of relaxing, was a fourteen-year-old girl. He'd been on the force for ten years. He'd seen far too many crimes. Some nights he couldn't sleep. A lunatic who could shrink objects. An innocent-sounding Quirk? Maybe. Until the bastard tricked eleven people into swallowing knives, including a five-year-old boy. A sociopathic woman who could shatter glass with her voice. A husband who killed his wife by liquefying the ground beneath her feet.

His eyes returned to the portfolio.

Ryuko Matoi.

Third year student at Salty Banks Middle School.

Co-captain of the track and field team.

Last year's Aichi Prefecture's preteen poetry slam winner.

And last but not least, daughter of the late Isshin Matoi, world-renowned expert in Quirks.

With a discontent grumble on his lips, he once more compared the school photograph in the folder to the teenager glaring holes in the wall above his forehead. Weeks on the street hadn't been kind to Ryuko. Navy-blue hair lay matted against dirtied skin. Clothes costing more than his salary were torn. Her eyes were bloodshot. A backpack containing remnants of chocolate and just enough pocket change to last another day.

"Alright, let's start from the beginning."

When was the last time she'd slept?

"October third - you failed to show up for school. October fourth - your principal calls the police."

The bandage on his nose itched.

"This morning, Ichika Suzuki, ninety years old, saw someone sneaking into Seiai Academy. She informed the nearest officer, but by the time they arrived, your fight with Class 2-A had spilled into the academy's courtyard."

Quirks manifested in far too many shapes and sizes. Some were stronger than others. Some were combat-focused while others were more useful in search and rescue operations. Or support. He was certain someone with a higher pay grade made a catalogue. But an entire class of aspiring heroes-to-be overwhelmed by a sleep-deprived middle schooler? That was a little difficult to believe. And yet, "You knocked out ten students, including the class president and homeroom teacher, before Rumi Usagiyama subdued you."

Ryuko's eye twitched, "They started it!"

Tsumugu folded his arms.

Standard police procedure usually involved keeping a minor's name out of the papers. More often than not, eyewitnesses were wrong. Or confused. Or scared. And a teenager would inadvertently be blamed for a villain's actions. But this? *This* was a public relation's nightmare. And he resisted the urge to sigh. Two broken arms... a fractured scapula... seven broken noses... multiple bruises and concussion. There was no keeping this quiet. Parents were more than likely pressing charges. The chief wanted to know why Professor Matoi's daughter committed several felonies. And the ravenous press was scouring the landscape for information on the 'villain' who assaulted Seiai Academy in broad daylight.

"Alright," the chair shifted underneath his weight, "Why Seiai Academy?"

"Because I wanted to."

Ryuko shifted uncomfortably in her chair, "That good enough?"

"Let me give you two useful pieces of information," he unfolded his arms. He was trained to deal with villains. Not scared children. Because that was what Ryuko Matoi was. Beneath her anger and bloodied knuckles was a scared girl who recently lost her father, "First, I would seriously consider calling a -"

The door opened.

And *he* walked in.

Less of a person and more of a force of nature with boundless personality, charisma and enough enthusiasm to protect an entire city, All Might stepped into the room with almost an absence of sound. Seven feet of chiseled muscles anything but concealed beneath blue, red and yellow spandex. Yellow hair shining brighter than a summer's day. Pearly white teeth pulled into an infectious smile impossible to ignore. In ninety nine out of a hundred scenarios, the country's finest hero's arrival heralded hope. His appearance onto the scene meant nobody needed to be afraid. That there was no longer any reason to worry.

"Sergeant Kinagase!"

The sheer difference in size between Tsumugu Kinagase and the country's greatest hero was almost obnoxious.

"Forgive me, but I was passing through the neighborhood when I heard about this morning's unfortunate incident," nobody, not even All Might, believed the half-hearted excuse for barging into the room at the dead of night. Ryuko and Tsumugu reacted equally nonplussed, leaving the strongest hero grinning awkwardly, "Am I interrupting something?"

"Yeah, you kinda - "

"Not really," cutting off Ryuko's snark, Tsumugu reflexively reached for the pack of cigarette he'd tossed in the trash months ago, "I was getting ready to file Ryuko Matoi's paperwork."

"That won't be necessary!"

Perfectly equidistant from Sergeant Kinagase and Ryuko, the latter of whom appeared particularly annoyed at his timely arrival, All Might propped a hand on his waist while saluting with the other, "Rest assured - I don't condone young Ryuko's behavior. Vigilantism has no place in our society. No matter how unfair we believe the world to be, laws exist to protect those unable to protect themselves. If we allowed everyone to take matters into their own hands, society would quickly fall apart. That said, it seems Seiai Academy has decided not to press charges."

"What?"

In contrast to Ryuko's disbelief, the number one hero's boisterous voice didn't shift from its reassuring timber, "Surely you told Sergeant Kinagase what happened? No? Well, in that case, allow me," with a smile blinding in its brilliance, All Might did just that, "Yes. A funny thing. Everyone was so gung-ho on throwing the book at Ryuko until *someone* requisitioned their security footage. A noble request. And one that unraveled the true order of events. Not only did Ryuko *not* throw the first punch, she refrained from using her Quirk against the students. A significant difference from eye-witness accounts, wouldn't you agree?"

A moment of silence.

"Of course, she trespassed with intent to commit mischief on private property. No ignoring that," the hero shook his head, acting more like a disappointed parent than the symbol of peace, "Which is why she'll perform one hundred hours of community service and write an apology to Seiai Academy."

Ryuko almost choked.

But when All Might looked at her, she swallowed what she really wanted to tell him, "Fine. Whatever."

"Great!"

With another laugh, oblivious to Ryuko's train of thought, the hero attempted to diverge the conversation, "Now then, Ryuko, I think - "

"All Might, there are two things you need to know."

Steel scrapped against concrete like nails on a chalkboard as Tsumugu pushed himself onto his feet, "First, unless I'm mistaken, you're attempting to interfere with an ongoing police investigation."

"Well, actually..."

"Second - " cutting off All Might's defense, he stepped towards the stunned hero, " - you free Saturday? We need a judge for our costume contest. Gang Orca was supposed to do it, but something came up."

"Er... Saturday, you say?"

A dollop of sweat trickled down All Might's grinning visage, "I'll need to consult my schedule. The duties of a hero are never-ending, after all, but I don't see why not."

"Guess I'd better break the news to the chief," Tsumugu shrugged, half-turning towards the door while reaching into his pocket for the cigarettes he no longer smoked. An annoying force of habit, "Oh, right," one last piece of information remained. Something he couldn't ignore no matter how much the symbol of peace wanted him to, "Next time you pull a stunt like this I won't be so lenient."

"You don't need to worry about Ryuko! I'll take full responsibility for her rehabilitation!"

"Alright. I'll send your agency the paperwork," too tired for the hero's enthusiasm, Tsumugu kept walking.

Ryuko waited just long enough for the door to close.

"I didn't need help."

She didn't like silence. Not anymore. She didn't like the sound of blood rushing through her ears or the dull humming that reached every corner and shadow. She hated the feeling of being alone. Chewing her cheek, Ryuko tried glaring at All Might. But she couldn't, instead settling on a grumble. Because he was smiling. Because he was *a/ways* smiling that familiar smile. Everywhere. When fighting villains. When giving interviews after stopping a bank robbery. It was enough to sap the anger from her heart, "Especially from *you* ."

"Is that so?"

Mischievousness washed over All Might, "I suppose nothing I say will change your mind?"

"Nope."

"Alright, prison it is!"

"I didn't say that!"

A blush quickly spread across Ryuko's cheeks. Not from nervousness. Not entirely. All Might noticed it. He memorized every detail. If his persona were anything like the image everyone saw on television, he'd perhaps chuckle at her embarrassment. Or crack a friendly joke. But there was a time and place for everything. And while his smile remained vibrant, his voice softened, exposing far more vulnerability than one expected from the symbol of peace and justice, "It's a relief knowing you're alright. Everybody was worried when you disappeared."

"What the hell was I supposed to do?"

Ryuko's voice hitched.

"Nobody was doing anything! Not you! Not nobody!"

Memories of standing over a grave. Rain falling down her back. People she knew. Heroes she didn't know. Everybody talking and apologizing without saying anything. Heading home to an empty house. Waking up the next morning. Realizing it hadn't been a bad dream. Going to school like nothing changed. Sitting at her desk. Ignoring everyone trying to say they were sorry for her loss. Going back home. Ignoring the hero outside. Sitting alone in the kitchen. Remembering the blood - so much blood, none of it hers - as she shook her dad.

"That's why I had to do something!"

She'd never forget the villain.

"No matter what it takes, she's gonna pay!"

Blonde hair.

A school uniform.

And laughter like ground glass.

"Your heart is strong, Ryuko," Toshinori's smile never wavered, because he wasn't smiling for himself, but for Ryuko, "Far stronger than most," to smile despite the darkness was one of his teacher's greatest lessons, "No matter what you choose to do, I'm certain your father would be proud," the concrete was cold against his knee. Yet personal discomfort took a backseat, "And while it may sound somewhat cliché," when he spoke, one hand resting on Ryuko's shoulder and his smile genuine, it was not as All Might, but Toshinori Yagi, "There's no shame in asking for help. Even the strongest heroes can't do everything alone."

"Is she out there, tied up?" framing the hypothetical question as anything but hypothetical, Ryuko scoffed when All Might said less than nothing, "Thought so."

"I see... well, I suppose there's no point beating around the bush."

There was a time and place for platitudes. Some people demanded honesty. Others needed false hope so that they could sprint towards the light themselves. Beneath a smile which meant far more in the past, Toshinori recognized the darkness encompassing Ryuko's heart. He'd seen many times. Far too many.

"I seem to recall you shouting that nobody cared about your father," adding a bit of bravado to his voice, Toshinori rubbed his chin while angling his head ten degrees rightward, "An interesting accusation. One I'll have to discuss with Sir Nighteye when he's not working on your father's case. I'm certain he'll find that quite amusing."

"Say what!?"

"I won't lie, Ryuko. It will take time to find this villain," as much as Toshinori wished otherwise, he wasn't lying. Yet that was no excuse to not smile, "But rest assured - when Sir does find her, I'll ***personally*** bring her to justice."

"... fine."

It felt weird. Like a bad itch vanishing without being scratched. Ryuko didn't know what to say. Or even to say anything, "But if you're screwing with me, I'll kick your butt!"

She meant every word.

Yet All Might *laughed* .

"Whatever," scrapping her chair backwards, Ryuko grumbled. She was tired. Hungry. Exhausted. And seriously needed a long shower, "Just, ugh, whatever. Can I go home now?"

"Not yet."

All Might never physically try stopping her.

He didn't need to.

Thump!

What he dropped onto the table did.

"Your father wasn't a hero, but someone doesn't need overdeveloped muscles or heat vision to make a difference," the envelope appeared innocuous, at first glance. A boring shade of beige. A coffee stain on the upper right corner, almost hiding the insignia across the front, "Sometimes all it takes is a good education," Toshinori patted the suspiciously thick stack of pages drawing Ryuko's gaze like a five-car pileup, "Which is why I've taken the liberty of printing you an application for UA!"

"HELL NO!"

Her punches packed quite a bit of power. Those uptight morons at Seiai Academy learned that first-hand. Yet when her knuckles crashed against All Might's abdominal muscles with little more than a soft *whump*, Ryuko's eyes widened.

And then the *pain* came.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!"

"The next entrance exam is in February! Plenty of time to finish your community service," as Ryuko nursed her fingers, All Might laughed, "But don't expect special favors. If you truly desire to get into UA, it must be on your own merits."

"LIKE HELL I'M GONNA APPLY TO UA JUST BECAUSE YOU ASKED!"

"That's the spirit, Ryuko! Now time to get you home," turning towards the door, the almost eight-foot-tall mass of muscles, charisma and heroism smirked, "So, hop on and let's go!"

Ryuko's eye twitched.

"... no. "

"Come on, I'm faster than the train!"

"I said no!"

"Don't be childish!"

"Don't make me stick my Quirk straight up your - "

When the symbol of peace and justice grabbed her mid-threat, laughed, gathered his bearings and sprinted out of the police station while waving good night to Tsumugu Kinagase, a thought occurred to Ryuko. She was going to kill him. She didn't know how long it would take. Or when it would happen. But she was going to ***kill*** him.

Eventually.

Chapter 2

Author's Note #1: The chapters are also a lot shorter than my other stories. No more the two thousand words.

My Bloody Academia

"So, this is it, huh?"

"An entire city!?"

"Geez, UA sure has everything!"

"There are supposed to be robots, right?"

"Oh man, robots are resistant to acid, aren't they?"

"This is going to be awesome!"

"Hey! Hey! Hey! What's the holdup!?"

Excitement, nervousness and apprehension electrified the atmosphere.

Students who'd spent years buried in hero programs - studying, practicing and training - stood outside a large-scale replica of downtown Musutafu.

"Ugh!"

Standing by herself, February not-so-subtly slapping her across the face, Ryuko glared at the gates, demanding they open through sheer willpower, "Can't they do this inside?"

She'd watched the weather *and* looked at her phone before catching the bus to Musutafu. She'd chosen the warmest tracksuit in her closet. But her tracksuit might as well have been a bikini for all the good it did. She shivered. Goosebumps spread down her arms. Her breath was visible. Her teeth chattered. She tried imagining being somewhere warm, like a beach or in a volcano. But then she remembered stumbling out of bed at five in the morning. And whatever warmth remained vanished. God damn, it was cold! She had to keep moving or the blood would freeze in her veins.

Once her blood started flowing, she'd warm up real fast.

But the dumbassery was wearing down her patience.

Group C.

One hundred people.

One hundred Quirks.

And that was only at *this* gate.

There were six other gates.

Yet *she* was the only one who seemed to notice it was freaking winter.

"C'mon," bouncing in place, Ryuko redoubled her efforts to mentally force time forward, "What's taking them so - "

"WHOOOPS, SORRY ABOUT THAT, FOLKS!"

Somewhere far away, Present Mic chuckled.

"THERE WAS A LITTLE SNAG WITH ONE OF THE BUSES, BUT GOOD NEWS! EVERYONE'S JUST ABOUT REACHED THEIR RESPECTIVE BATTLE CENTERS! CAN I GET A 'YAAAAAY'!?"

The silence was downright deafening.

"Geez," she didn't know if it was Present Mic's Quirk or UA put speakers under every rock. For all she knew, it could be both. Because this was UA, where students fought killer robots in not one or two, but seven, full-size neighborhoods, "Could he be any louder?"

With a crooked scowl and cheeks blushing bright red from the cold, Ryuko shivered.

Three months.

Three long months.

Three months and less than nothing to show for it.

At first, she'd wanted to believe All Might would find the villain who took her dad. He was the greatest hero in the world. The strongest and fastest and toughest badass. He could do anything. And more than anything, she wanted *closure*. But as weeks stretched into months, her hopes dimmed. She stopped caring about All Might's updates. She stopped listening to his messages. Eventually, she blocked his number altogether. What was the point if day after day, week after week, nothing changed? That, more than anything, tore at something primal inside her chest. Three months and nobody knew anything about the villain who killed her dad. Not even their name. Not even their damn Quirk.

How was that freaking possible?

Nothing about the villain's Quirk made sense.

It should have made her easy to find!

And yet...

"Tsk," she removed a hand from her pocket. The cold against her bare knuckles served its purpose. As her skin blistered red, her anger dissipated. "No point thinkin' about it now."

It wasn't over.

And it wouldn't *be* over until she brought that villain to justice.

One way or another.

With or without All Might.

For the tenth time since rolling out of bed, Ryuko wondered if she should have burnt her application to UA.

Her mouth twitched.

Four levels of robots with increasing difficulty. Some possibly armed to the teeth. Others programmed to neutralize villains. Everyone would obviously go for the one-pointers, which meant as long as she focused on the two and three-pointers, racking up points would be straightforward. But what if destroying the tougher robots required teamwork? Her eyebrow twitched. If teamwork was necessary, she needed someone to complement her Quirk. Someone who could keep up. Someone fast on the uptake. But who? She looked around, eyes shifting from one person to the next. There was the guy made of metal. He seemed pretty tough, yet his yelling would probably give her a headache. Then there was the girl with the massive hands. Eh, maybe. Oh, and the bone porcupine who'd apologized for skewering his seat on the bus.

So many different Quirks and so few options.

"Everyone sure looks really tough."

Someone was standing next to her.

But she refused to acknowledge their existence in the hopes they'd go away if she kept ignoring them.

"I mean, UA's one of the best schools in the country, so that sorta makes sense," but apparently someone didn't get the hint. Because they kept talking, "Well, Shiketsu's pretty good, too. So is

Ketsubutsu. And Seiai's alright, if you have loads of money. But ever since a nasty villain took down one of the second-year classes without breaking a sweat, their reputation nosedived straight into the toilet."

A gurgle forced its way up Ryuko's throat.

But surprise quickly gave way to anger, which surrendered to frustration. Her knuckles cracked. Her fingernails pushed into her palms. She turned around, expecting someone idiotic enough to believe blackmailing *her* was a brilliant idea. Instead, she found herself face-to-face with a brown-haired girl with matching eyes and a bright pink tracksuit smiling like she was a puppy.

She tried.

She *really* tried.

But no matter how hard she tried, Ryuko felt the anger trickle from her heart, "Uhh..."

"Oh, right!"

The girl slapped her cheeks, leaving red prints across a blossoming smile, "Mako Mankanshoku! Third Year at Dathomi Middle School! And my Quirk makes weird stuff happen!"

Ryuko didn't quite know what to make of that.

"... I'm Ryuko," but she settled on pretending the last twenty seconds never happened, "So, your Quirk makes weird stuff happen? Sounds neat, I guess."

"Well... yes, but no. And also... yes."

If she expected Mako to explain her Quirk, Ryuko was left hanging when the girl instead crouched onto the ground and began drawing something in the dirt, "I've always been really good with numbers. Numbers are fun. Numbers are life. That's why mom said I should

become an accountant. Because after the feds realized I'd been filing our family's taxes, it was either going to college or visiting dad in jail for the next ten years."

"... huh?"

Ryuko listed sideways, her brain lurching to a crawl.

"That's why I applied to UA's normal people program. But I must've taken the wrong test," counting individual pebbles around the stick, Mako mumbled into her knees, "Because I'm about to fight killer robots and stuff. Oh man, mom's seriously going to kill me if I end up dead."

"Huh!?"

It was confusing. Everything about Mako was confusing. Was she stupid? Or a genius? Was she giving away her Quirk because she had a big mouth? Or was her Quirk a distraction to keep her off-balance? Any other day, Ryuko would have believed the latter without missing a beat. But when she looked at what Mako was drawing in the dirt - a weird caricature of All Might riding Godzilla like a horse while Endeavor tossed wheels of fire at them - she reconsidered. Besides, if Mako was telling the truth, UA would have caught their mistake.

Wouldn't they?

"Right," scratching her neck, Ryuko tried ending the conversation before it reached a level of weirdness she wasn't prepared for, "It was nice meeting you and all, but -"

"So, what's your Quirk?"

And Mako was back in the game, all smiles and no grumbling, "You're super serious, so it's gotta be something amazing, right?"

Ryuko felt her cheeks flush red not from the cold, but embarrassment, "Ain't that a bit personal?"

"I told you about mine."

"Well, for all I know, you lied."

"Why would I lie to my new bestie?"

"Your new - " Ryuko started, stopped herself, then restarted, " - we just met, and you want to be friends?"

"I'm not cut out for this hero business," still holding onto the stick, Mako matched Ryuko's frown with a smile, "But that's not a problem! It just means I've gotta stay positive! Always search for the bright light in life! That's what mom says! Even if it's from the sidelines!"

" AAAAND START!"

Yet nobody moved.

"WHAT'S THE MATTER? THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A COUNTDOWN IN A REAL BATTLE! RUN! RUUUUN! CONSIDER THE BATON TOSSED!"

Screams and shouts.

Shoving and pushing.

Quirks activating.

A tidal wave of nervousness and excitement.

"Err, uh, stay here, Mako," she didn't activate her own Quirk, but feet bouncing against the ground, caught between a rock and a hard place, Ryuko hesitated just long enough to look around before stampeding towards the doors and the mechanical carnage waiting inside, "Someone from UA will pick you up!"

Co-captain of the track and field team came with perks.

Some good.

Some bad.

Waking up five in the morning for ten-mile jogs. Special diets. Lectures on how to overcome competition without speed-based Quirks. And the ability to go from zero to holy shit she's fast in less than a second. Some people were naturally fast. Others had Quirks that made them faster. But as Mako vanished into the rearview mirror, waving and cheering like there was no tomorrow, she passed a pink-skinned girl struggling to catch her breath. She overtook a half-lizard, half-dragon. Every step carried her closer to the front. Every slap of a bright red sneaker against pavement propelled her forward a little faster. And soon enough, she was keeping pace with the obnoxious idiot who'd banged his fists on the doors like a moron.

A pause.

"Huh, you're pretty fast."

Another pause.

"Focused, huh? Awesome! The name's Tetsutetsu!"

She kept ignoring him.

"Hey! What's your problem!?" one silver eye twitching, Tetsutetsu growled, "Here I am being polite and you're just gonna ignore me!?"

As he kept shouting - at her, around her and *through* her - nonsense, her mouth twitched.

"HEY! GET BACK HERE! I'M NOT DONE TALKING WITH YOU!"

Her lungs burned. Her cheeks flushed bright red. And there was a tightness in her chest from the cold. But Ryuko couldn't care less. She forced his voice to the furthest corner of her mind and ran that

much faster. The sooner she couldn't hear him, the better. Because she was starting to have seriously tempting 'anti-heroic' ideas involving planting her foot where the sun didn't shine, disqualification or not.

Something caught her eye.

It resembled an insect. Or maybe a scorpion. Or one of those weird bugs she'd read about. Standing six feet at the shoulder, a dark shade of green, two tails, the number 'two' painted in yellow. The two-pointer diligently marched into the middle of the street, soulless red eyes *tracking* her position.

And then *they* came.

The same shade of green. A single red eye on an elongated neck. The number 'one' painted in bright white. The one-pointers surrounded the two-pointer. Five of them. No, six. One was hiding behind another building. Out of caution, Ryuko recounted, realizing there weren't six robots, but seven of them. Now there were eight.

One heartbeat.

A cool warmth trickled through her body. A tingling spreading to her fingers and toes. Her heart pulsed. Her thoughts quickened. And when she was close enough to the one-pointers to notice the scratches on their green paintjobs, *blood*, thick and viscous, gushed into the cold February morning. More than two liters of blood blossomed from her skin. The crimson liquid undulated to unheard music. Individual droplets burst outwards only to quickly reunite with the whole.

Two heartbeats.

The thick fluid - her blood - solidified into a blade three feet long.

Another heartbeat.

Blood sliced through metal.

A fourth heartbeat.

Ryuko waited until the world stopped spinning and her heart steadied before standing up. Breathing slightly heavier than normal, she swallowed the metallic bile rising in the back of her throat, dizziness slowing her thoughts. Even so, she smiled. Behind her, frozen in their last moments, the one-pointers and two-pointer convulsed before collapsing to the ground, metal sliding against metal while arcs of vibrant electricity sparked between cleanly-sliced limbs. Eleven points in less than a minute?

At this rate she was going to pass UA's stupid practical exam without

-

"GAAAAAGGHH!"

A pulverized two-pointer soared overhead.

Followed by Tetsutetsu, sharpened teeth twisted into a vicious snarl, "DIE YOU STUPID ROBOTS!"

First Mako. Now this moron.

As Tetsutetsu or whatever his name was recklessly charged another group of robots, Ryuko winced, "Man, is everyone here weird?"

Chapter 3

"How much time has passed?"

"A little over six minutes."

"Any injuries?"

"Sprained ankles. A few broken bones. Minor Quirk overuse. Nothing serious, but Recovery Girl's been alerted. She'll make the final determination."

"Oh my, this year's recruits look exceptionally promising," a short pause, "But programming the villains to actively seek out students? Isn't that a little too much?"

"After last year's exam proved disappointing, I thought something new and exciting would liven things up," in a darkened room illuminated by multiple video feeds and firmly kept in the mid-fifties thanks to round-the-clock air conditioning, beady eyes watched countless students strive to achieve victory. One such examinee ignored a one-pointer who'd managed to pin another student to the ground. While none of the students were in true danger - the villains were programmed to restrain, not attack - leaving someone to fend for themselves was the antithesis of heroism.

On the other hand, until a threat was eliminated, altruism could be exchanged for pragmatism.

Sometimes it was better for a hero to focus on defeating a villain.

There were always exceptions, of course.

Which was the point of the practical exam - to see what potential heroes do in a variety of conflicting situations.

"The examinees have no idea how many villains are present or their locations. They have limited time, must investigate a large area and hunt down targets. Some utilize information-gathering to plan out attacks while others rely upon speed to pull ahead of their peers. Of course, remaining calm under pressure can be advantageous. As can overwhelming power and combat ability. The most successful students demonstrate combinations of these tactics. They're the ones who rack up the highest scores."

Nezu - who could be a mouse or a bear or possibly a dog, but more importantly, was UA's principal - raised a paw, "Now then, please bring up the top ten examinees."

Katsuki Bakugo - 63 Villain Points

Ryuko Matoi - 55 Villain Points

Yosetsu Awase - 43 Villain Points

Tetsutetsu Tetsutetsu - 40 Villain Points

Tenya Ida - 40 Villain Points

Fumikage Tokoyami - 37 Villain Points

Jurota Shishida - 32 Villain Points

Ibara Shiozaki - 25 Villain Points

Eijiro Kirishima - 22 Villain Points

Ochaco Uraraka - 21 Villain Points

"Matoi?"

Ken Ishiyama - known to the public as Cementoss - focused on the familiar surname.

A shadowed hand depressed several keys in specific order.

On the high-definition screens built into the wall, several cameras recording every aspect and angle of the practical exam - down to the twitching of an examinee's fingers - switched to Ryuko. The gathered faculty, those not on standby for emergencies, watched the fourteen-year-old teenager engage and destroy a one-pointer with surprising effortlessness. Her speed drew their attention. Her technique, or lack thereof, earned more than a few notes. A downward swing ending in a muted explosion. As whispers spread amongst the pro hero faculty, someone typed another command into the computer, bringing up news articles stretching back several months, Ryuko's middle school photo and a photocopy of her relatively high score on the written exam.

"So, she's the one who attacked Seiai Academy?"

"And without using her Quirk, too."

"Impressive."

"A hero had to restrain her, right? Who was it, again?"

"The Rabbit Hero: Mirko."

"Her Quirk appears rather straightforward," Hirooki Anakuro - Thirteen - observed with necessary detachment. Every hero worth their license knew about 'Professor Matoi,' one of the world's foremost experts on Quirks. His murder at the hands of an unknown villain had struck the hero community *hard*. All Might. Endeavor. Every hero wanted to bring his killer to justice, "An Emitter type, right?"

"Possibly."

Preoccupied with observing the *other* students pushing themselves to the limit, Shota Aizawa lethargically grumbled, "But if you're that curious, you can ask her *after* the exam."

An enrapturing yet mature voice, full lips framed between spiky dark purple hair, leaned towards the muscular man seated next to her, "So...?"

"I'll admit, at first glance our Quirks are similar."

Sekijiro Kan - the well-known Blood Hero: Vlad King, who utilized copious amounts of his own blood to capture and incapacitate villains and criminals alike - stroked his chin, drawing attention towards his fangs. Narrow eyes behind an orange visor tightened. Blood Quirks were uncommon. And those capable of manipulating their own blood instead of influencing others even more so, "But her Quirk enhances her blood's durability far beyond anything I can do," a grunt passed through his lips, "That being said - there's a noticeable limitation."

Ryuko Matoi - 57 Villain Points

Katsuki Bakugo - 66 Villain Points

"Can we please focus?"

As hundreds of scores updated in real-time, Aizawa's exhaustion sharpened, "There are other students besides Ryuko Matoi taking the exam."

Nemuri Kayama - renowned throughout Japan as the adult-rated heroine whose arrival heralded laws concerning how much skin a costume could show - either ignored her friend's request or didn't hear him, "It's quantity."

Across the room, Aizawa contemplated saying something, thought better of himself and decided that, no, it wasn't worth getting involved.

"Yes, look at her eyes. Her pupils are dilated. She's probably dizzy. And she's breathing heavy," Sekijiro sat back, content yet disappointed, "There's clearly a hard ceiling to how much blood she

can manipulate. But how high is the question. An ordinary person would have already passed out and died from losing that much blood. Yet she's barely inconvenienced."

"How much blood are we talking about?"

"At least five or six times the average adult," Vlad King answered, "Maybe more."

"It seems her Quirk sacrifices quantity for quality," no longer able to ignore the tedious conversation about a single examinee's Quirk, Aizawa reluctantly surrendered to the collective insanity, "There's more. She's fast on her feet and quite strong. Physically, at least. Cutting through metal that easily requires more than an exceptionally sharp blade," his weary eyes drifted towards Ryuko's weapon of choice - a crystalline disaster vaguely shaped into something most people might recognize as a sword, "Yet the construction of her sword implies a lack of training. This is probably the first time she's used her Quirk for more than a few minutes at a time. Satisfied?"

"Hmph."

"Good," Aizawa grumbled into his scarf, "Now get back to work."

Ryuko Matoi - 58 Villain Points

Katsuki Bakugo - 70 Villain Points

Side-by-side with Ryuko and Katsuki's respective battles against UA's robotics department, another examinee caught Snipe's attention, "Tenya Ida... Ingenium's brother?"

"Yes."

"Hmm... the villains are having some difficulty adjusting for his Quirk's speed. We'll need to improve their sensors for next year."

"Will that be enough?"

"Look at that. Examinee 7423's using her Quirk to restrain a villain while Examine 7233 destroys it."

"Are they working together?"

"No, it appears they simply ran into each other."

"A shame. Still, she's earned a few rescue points for that."

As the faculty debated and watched, observed and commented, Principal Nezu sipped his tea. It was bitter yet carried a hint of vanilla. It lingered on his tongue, clinging to taste buds several times more sensitive than a human's. He loved this time of year. Heroes-in-training struggling against the odds. Promising students utilizing their Quirks in different yet exciting ways. Quirks he hadn't seen before. It was a shame only thirty-six prospective heroes would be accepted on top of the four who'd passed the recommendation exam. But life wasn't always fair. Then there was Ryuko Matoi. When All Might explained what happened - the incident at Seiai Academy, interjecting himself into the subsequent investigation and handing her an application to UA, he hadn't been livid or upset. Certainly not upset enough to make All Might wash the Unforeseen Simulation Zone's floors. Twice. Heavens no! Yet what was done was done. Ryuko was here. And from the looks of things, she was doing a fairly decent job.

Not that he would allow personal bias cloud his judgement.

Isshin's daughter or not, she was just another student.

If Ryuko passed, she passed.

If she failed, she failed.

Placing his paw on the scale simply because he and Isshin had been acquaintances would forever tarnish UA's reputation.

Not to mention upsetting the board of directors.

Drawing the mostly-finished cup to his snout, Nezu partook of delightful bitterness, "Ryuko is certainly doing quite well. Yet Katsuki Bakugo's earned more villain points. But Tetsutetsu Tetsutesu's not far behind. I'm curious which student will take the gold. Or maybe someone else, an examinee nobody expects to win, will emerge this year's winner."

Ryuko Matoi - 59 Villain Points

Katsuki Bakugo - 72 Villain Points

"Katsuki Bakugo," her voice lacking its normally sultry inflection, Midnight watched the latter's score increase another point, "At the rate he's going, he won't earn any rescue points."

A chorused voice belonging to Ectoplasm betrayed underlying thought, "It would be the first time in years."

"He has some potential," the R-Rated hero leaned onto the armrest, fingers pressed against her cheek, "But his personality leaves much to be desired."

"Every student earns at least a few rescue points," it was the truth. Assisting another examinee against a villain. Providing directions. Acting heroically. There were multitudes of ways to earn rescue points. But focusing on the video feed showing Katsuki Bakugo detonating a two-pointer point-blank with his Quirk after luring it into an empty alley, Ectoplasm flinched at the maniacal youth's erratic behavior.

"DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE YOU METAL HUNK OF JUNK!"

Vlad King's expression tightened, "He's going to be a handful."

Ryuko Matoi - 60 Villain Points

Katsuki Bakugo - 74 Villain Points

"Defeat as many villains as possible. Use whatever means at your disposal. As long as you keep it strictly heroic, fight to your heart's content. That's what we told the students."

Nezu laughed.

An ominous chuckle.

"But heroes aren't simply ranked by strength, although powerful Quirks are quite useful when it comes to arresting villains," yet nobody paid attention to his laughter. Not that they were in any position to argue. In any case, Nezu reached for the button built into his armrest. A button that opened another hidden compartment housing a larger red button, "That's why heroes normally work together. Teamwork is an essential part of heroism. If your Quirk has a weakness, another hero can cover for it. And vice versa."

"Some students have formed rudimentary teams," Cementoss pointed out, "Those are the ones who'll earn the most rescue points."

Ryuko Matoi - 62 Villain Points

Katsuki Bakugo - 76 Villain Points

"But it's only when pushed to the extreme that true heroes show their mettle."

Ryuko Matoi - 63 Villain Points

Katsuki Bakugo - 77 Villain Points

"And since villains don't wait for heroes to show up," knowing the chaos about to unfold, Nezu pressed the 'Yakuri Switch,' sat back and gleefully sipped his tea, "Why should we?"

Chapter 4

Another villain met its end at the hands of her Quirk.

"That makes sixty-three points."

About half a dozen heroes-in-training - the *only* examinees who'd stuck close enough to pick off whatever villains she didn't destroy - whispered amongst themselves.

But she ignored them.

With a snap of her arm and clockwise twist of her wrist, Ryuko deactivated her Quirk. She didn't *need* to do anything. Her Quirk was instinctive. Subconscious. She just 'thought about it' and her blood listened. But the physical motion made her feel better. And as her weapon melted into something resembling jelly, liquefied completely, flowed between her fingers and disappeared into her body, earning *more* whispers from the peanut gallery, she yawned. How much longer was the test? Five minutes? Three? Or maybe there were only a couple of seconds left. She couldn't tell. Everything was honestly starting to blur together.

Strewn across the neighborhood were metal corpses.

Most destroyed by her.

The rest by everyone else.

It had to *suck* spending years training your ass off - homework, interning, practicing or whatever - only to lose to someone like *her* .

BOOM!

The ground didn't so much shake as suddenly, and without warning, tremble, "What the - "

BOOM!

Cables snapped. Metal buckled. Asphalt shattered. Dust and smoke billowed into the cold February morning as something shoved its way out of the earth. A presence filled a vacuum nobody knew existed. Caught by surprised, Ryuko nevertheless managed to close her mouth before the shockwave hit them. Someone screamed. Someone shouted. Then everything went deadly silent as the smoke cleared and *it* appeared. A villain taller than buildings. Treads wide enough to reach both sides of the street. Claws powerful enough to rip chunks of concrete. Forest green armored plating and glowing red eyes. She knew what this thing was.

The zero-pointer.

The stupidly named arena trap.

A multi-jointed arm, powerful servos manipulating thousands of tons of metal and machinery, reared backwards.

"Oh, you've got to be KIDDING ME!"

Even halfway across the full-scale replica of downtown Musutafu, the physical calculations behind a giant robot deciding to punch the ground had only one conclusion.

KABOOM!

The seismic clash between reinforced armored knuckles and asphalt was no contest. The road buckled. Pavement twisted, contorted and disintegrated. Everything within arm's range was blown backwards. Glass shattered. Buildings collapsed. The earth trembled. Far enough away that she could literally see the entire villain from head to tread, Ryuko struggled to keep her footing. But it was like standing in a typhoon. Arms crossed, eyes twitching from the dust and lips twisted into a snarl, she resisted the shockwave rippling down the street.

"Damn it!"

Blood oozed through her skin, reforming into a familiar blade as the pressurized insanity faded, "I knew UA was crazy, but I didn't think they were this freaking nuts!"

Something warm trickled down her cheek.

There was no goddamn way UA expected them to fight something like *that* !

So, why wasn't she running?

Kendo Itsuka didn't know why she stopped running. Her Quirk was strong, but not flashy. There was no way she could fight that villain. None of them could. Only a pro like All Might stood a chance. It was better to run away. If this was the zero-point arena trap, fighting it was pointless. But as Kendo fled, never looking backwards and shame at running away from a villain touching her heart, someone caught her attention. It was the girl who'd been destroying villains left and right, racking up dozens of points faster than anyone else. Someone who earned more than enough villain points to easily pass the exam.

Far more than her.

"Hey!"

It was a difficult decision. It should have been easy, but it wasn't. Despite every instinct screaming to keep running towards safety, Kendo turned around and did the opposite. Aware of the villain's location and speed, she sprinted backwards. She grabbed the girl's shoulder, intent on pulling her along, "We have to get out of here!"

"I'm not going anywhere!"

Kendo flinched when the girl yanked her shoulder free, "You can't be seriously thinking of fighting that thing!"

"Why's that so difficult to believe? This thing's part of UA's stupid test! That means there's gotta be a way to take it down," despite forcing confidence into her voice, Ryuko couldn't stop sweat from trickling down her face, "If you want to run away with your tail between your legs, be my guest! But I'm not leaving until I'm damn sure this bastard's unstoppable!"

Kendo's teal eyes widened.

"Kendo Itsuka."

"... Ryuko."

The ground trembled when the zero-pointer pushed its way through another building. She could barely hear herself think, yet clapping her hands together and breathing through her nose, Kendo cleared her mind, "Alright, Ryuko, what's your plan?"

"Plan?"

Ryuko looked at Kendo like she'd grown another head, "Ain't got time for a plan! I just need to get some way to close enough to hit it point-blank with my Quirk!"

She'd thought it was metal.

Maybe a support item.

But the longer she stared at Ryuko's sword, the more Kendo recognized *why* it looked so strange. Her eyes swiveled towards the multitude of cuts adorning her fingers. Partially dried blood oozing from broken skin, "Your Quirk's that strong?"

"Don't know."

Refusing to tear her eyes away from the zero-pointer, Ryuko shrugged, "Never fought a giant robot before."

Kendo blinked.

"What if..." slowly, piece by piece, the rough outline of a plan formed in her mind. It was a stupid plan. An idiotic plan. But still a plan, "... if someone restrained that villain, if only for a few seconds?"

Bewilderment flashed across Ryuko's face, "Can you do that?"

"My Quirk's not strong enough," Kendo shook her head, "We'd need someone tougher. Someone -"

KABOOM!

Another shockwave.

Then someone bouncing down the road, colliding with a traffic light along the way before crashing into an abandoned minivan.

A moment passed.

"RRAAAAAAGGGHH!"

A barbaric scream shattered the silence as a lustrous silver fist, knuckles silhouetted against a glass backdrop, burst through the car's passenger side door, followed in relatively short order by Tetsutetsu himself. Through a combination of physical strength, manly determination, frustration and his Quirk, he punched his way to relative freedom, casting aside what little remained of the inferior metal coffin. Steel and glass clung to his silver hair. Yet little worse for wear *after* getting backhanded across the neighborhood, Tetsutetsu screamed at the top of his lungs, "I'M GOING TO SMASH THAT ROBOT IF IT'S THE LAST THING I DO!"

"Huh..."

As the loudmouth recovered, Ryuko followed his trajectory back towards the villain.

Had he *seriously* tried fighting that thing by himself?

More importantly, did she care?

Ignoring the incredibly faint voice in the back of her mind, most likely her conscious, she rolled her tongue against her teeth before turning to Kendo, "He seems pretty tough."

"Yeah, but..." Kendo muttered, her expression falling, "You don't think he tried fighting that villain, do you?"

"Who cares."

Tetsutetsu *knew* when someone was mocking him. With the zero-pointer rolling closer, flattening cars and buildings in its wake, he turned around, metallic knuckles pounding against hardened flesh. Shaking away the cobwebs, he prepared to politely demand who insulted him. That's when he saw her. His eyes widened, then narrowed, then widened again. All in the same amount of time for his brain to catch up to the rest of reality.

"HEY! YOU'RE THAT RUDE CHICK FROM EARLIER IN THE EXAM!"

"Ryuko? Do you know him?"

"We have a plan to kick that thing's ass," brushing aside Kendo's question *and* the loud stupidity slamming against her face, Ryuko dug a finger into her ear, "You interested?"

"THE HELL'S THE MATTER WITH YOU!? ARE YOU SERIOUSLY IGNORING EVERYTHING I JUST SAID!?"

Ryuko flicked away a bit of earwax clinging to her pinkie, "That a yes?"

Tetsutetsu's eye visibly and painfully twitched. Why was she so cocky? Just because she might have earned more points and had an awesome Quirk didn't mean she was better than him! Of course, he still wanted to help! This was a villain! Heroes stood tall against villains no matter the odds. But he wasn't about to give her the satisfaction! Instead, he turned to the other girl.

The nicer one.

"We need someone to hold down the villain," Kendo hastily explained as the zero-pointer's arm reared upwards, "Can you do that?"

"That's it?"

There was the sound of steel crashing against steel. Sharp and pointed teeth twisted into a smirk. Hardened flesh further hardened. Knuckles popped one after another. Tetsutetsu's demeanor changed, "Not that I'm happy about letting someone else hog the spotlight, but we heroes have to stick together! Just say the word and I'll piledrive that hunk of junk into next year!

An enormous shadow blotted out the sun.

Green silhouetted against clouds.

"NOW!"

And Tetsutetsu *moved* .

KABOOM!

Thousands of pounds of metal wider than a bus smashed against his outstretched hands. Asphalt cracked beneath his feet, spiderwebs expanding until every pane of glass shattered in an explosion far *louder* than anyone expected. The air was forcefully driven out of his lungs. Standing in the epicenter of the seismic punch, gripping something impossible to truly hold, Tetsutetsu snarled. A desperate struggle to remain standing ensued. Sparks as bright as the summer sun jettisoned into reality as his fingers dug into the enormous fist pressing down on his head. His sneakers sunk an inch through pavement, then another inch, then four inches, until he was standing knee-deep in the road.

"GAAAAHHHH!"

Sweat dripped from silver pores as his fingers dug into titanium.

Metal screeched and groaned.

Steam exploded between tightly clenched teeth.

His arms felt like they were about to give out.

Yet the thought of giving up never crossed Tetsutetsu's mind.

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR!? TAKE THIS THING DOWN ALREADY!"

She was running long before he opened his mouth.

"HHHHRRRRRRRAAAAAAAA!"

The instant her sneaker touched down, momentarily slipping against polished metal, Ryuko *bolted* up the vertical surface. Despite gravity refusing to play ball, she forced herself even faster. She continuously placed one foot in front of the other, one arm pumping back and forth, the other furiously holding onto her sword. Her hair whipped in the breeze. Her heart pounded against the inside of her chest. She could feel her Quirk straining under exhaustion and weariness.

But she kept pushing her limits.

She forced her Quirk to remain active.

And upon reaching as high as she could possibly go, Ryuko curled her toes, vaulted straight upwards and summoned her full power.

Blood.

More blood than she'd ever used.

A lot of goddamn blood.

Blood *gushed* from her wrists and ankles. It exploded from her fingertips. It streamed out of her neck and stomach. The blood trickling down her cheek jumped into the air, almost as if electrified. Crimson rivers danced upon the cold morning. Droplets of vermillion orbited around equally vibrant tidal waves. And right away, Ryuko felt like her entire body had been dunked in acid while lit on fire. She felt like hurling. Her head hurt. Her vision blurred. Her lips tingled. It was getting hard to think. The world slowed. She couldn't feel cold or the warmth of her breath. The blood between her fingers partially reliquified, blood loss driving her consciousness towards darkness and nothingness.

"TAKE..."

She shouted.

She screamed.

Hair fluttering in the wind, cheeks flushed from blood loss and the bitter cold, as her ascent reached its absolute maximum, Ryuko hefted the jagged sword over her head, new blood merging with old in a cavalcade of vermillion. Her sword changed and transformed. She swallowed. She snarled. Gnashing her teeth, if only to drown out the increasingly despondent voice in the back of her mind demanding she stop, Ryuko leaned backwards, clenching her trembling fingers as everything simultaneously arrived at the singularity.

"... THIS!"

Quirks were amazing.

Quirks were batshit insane.

They manifested in all shapes, sizes and mutations. They could do anything, even break laws of physics. Maybe that was why her dad had spent all his time researching Quirks instead of coming to her track and field meets or parent-teacher night. People shouldn't be

able to fly, yet there were heroes who could do just that. Telekinesis and mind reading should be impossible. Punching concrete should shatter every bone in your hand instead of pulverizing a wall into dust. Living shadows, shooting fire and ice from your hands and manipulating blood should only exist in old comic books.

Yet here *she* was.

Floating high above the ground, nowhere to go but down, Ryuko swallowed the acidic bile rising from her stomach, clenched her jaw and *swung* the battle axe three times her size.

"What?"

"Did you see that?"

"Awesome!"

"We just lost contact with Executor B!"

"Impossible!"

"Executor C has just gone offline as well!"

"Switch screens!"

"Incredible!"

"Isn't that - "

"Oh my, these students certainly don't know the meaning of holding back."

UA's state-of-the-art zero-point arena trap, ten thousand tons of metal and artificial intelligence designed to scare students, three billion yen from design to construction. Reinforced titanium and depleted uranium armored plating. Adaptive programming. The ability to sense every heat signature within five hundred feet and adjust its movements to limit potential interactions. It was the pride

and joy of hero training. A villain bot large enough to dwarf heroes possessing Gigantification Quirks.

Innumerable error messages flashed across a virtual landscape.

Self-preservation scripts failed.

Sensors blinked out.

"Heh..."

She couldn't believe it.

Through eyes almost too tired to keep open, Ryuko watched the zero-pointer teeter sideways onto a building. Trembling lips convulsed into a smirk as the impact widened the massive gash reaching nearly halfway through the villain's head. A hollow chuckle. Honest pride at accomplishing something amazing. Darkness as gravity reasserted itself at the worst possible time. Exhaustion when her Quirk subconsciously deactivated. The faraway sensation of wind whipping through her hair. Eyes closing. Thinking she might have overused her Quirk just a little bit.

The feeling of falling.

And falling.

And falling.

And falling.

Kendo *forced* herself to move faster. Her body resisted. Her heart screaming that it could beat any faster, but she nevertheless pushed herself forward. Her sneakers slapped against cracked pavement. She ignored Tetsutetsu gingerly picking himself out of the ground. She dodged broken metal raining through the sky. Her hands expanded, growing more than ten times larger. She ran faster. She leapt forward. She *caught* Ryuko at the last possible second, knuckles scraping along the ground. The pain hurt. She might've

dislocated two or three fingers on her left hand, but Kendo simply couldn't find the urge to care.

"Ryuko!"

Parched lips opened, releasing a mixture of spittle and blood.

"... never doing... that... again..."

It was laughable. It was stupid. It made her angry. And relieved. Unable to decide how to respond to something so ridiculous, Kendo collapsed onto her knees.

"I'm fine, by the way," unaware of this, Ryuko's eyes fluttered open, introducing her exhausted brain to the timeless brilliance of sunlight, "... just... really tired..." she could remember hitting the villain with her Quirk, but nothing afterwards. Just darkness until waking up inside Kendo's sweaty hands, "... so, if you don't mind, I'm just... gonna lie here... for a while..."

"As a matter of fact, I *do* mind!"

Having lost her scrunchie at some point during the exam, Kendo's ginger hair resembled a vicious creature as she grabbed Ryuko with both hands, "What if I wasn't here? You had no idea what my Quirk was! What if I didn't catch you? You could have died!"

Ryuko shrugged.

Something impossible to define as a shrug since she actually didn't move.

Kendo felt the exact moment something inside her brain *snapped* .

A loud buzzer shattered the silence.

"Oh, thank god," she couldn't remember such an amazing sound. It was like heaven itself. Sheer, unadulterated relief swept through her veins. Throwing her head backwards, Kendo deactivated her Quirk,

Ryuko's protests at hitting the ground like a sack of potatoes the furthest thing from her mind, "It's finally over."

"Hey! Hey! Hey!"

Jogging at a faster-than-reasonable pace, silhouetted against the zero-pointer's broken and shattered remains, Tetsutetsu took a moment to catch his breath before punching the air with his fist, "Man, that was awesome! Seriously! Talk about a super move! That stupid villain never saw it coming!"

She was too exhausted to nod.

Or open her mouth.

Barely able to keep her eyes open, let alone argue, Ryuko nodded, hoping he'd shut up and move on.

"But I'm still waiting for your apology!"

"What? I... uh... huh..." as the conversation suddenly shifted in a dramatic and unexpected direction, Kendo raised a finger, "Ryuko, what's he talking about?"

"Seriously? Your name's Ryuko? Like the Dragoon Hero: Ryukyu?"

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched.

"No, it's not like *her* name," she attempted mustering something more than mild annoyance, but exhaustion meant threatening Tetsutetsu was out of the question, "Are you seriously stupid? Our names aren't even spelled the same way."

"WHAT WAS THAT!?"

As the shouting began - again - Ryuko pretended to pass out.

Which only pissed off Tetsutetsu.

"DAMN YOUR COCKY ATTITUDE! IF YOU WEREN'T SO TIRED, I'D KICK YOUR FREAKING ASS! DAMN IT! DON'T THINK JUST BECAUSE YOU PULLED AN AWESOME AND AMAZING STUNT AGAINST THAT VILLAIN THAT I'VE FORGOTTEN HOW RUDE YOU WERE! NOW APOLOGIZE AND -"

CHOP!

"Seriously, Ryuko," as the metal teen fell to the ground, dazed and confused, Kendo shook her good hand, "Do you know him?"

"I've honestly never seen him before in my life."

Chapter 5

An invitation to some fancy timeshare resort island.

"... junk..."

A free massage with purchase of so and so...

"... junk..."

The March edition of Support Gear Monthly with a cover highlighting an exclusive interview with Revocs' CEO on the upcoming Tokyo Fashion Week.

"... garbage..."

An envelope from UA.

"... trash... huh?"

It almost slipped through her fingers. The wax seal of UA. A stamped message saying 'gentle, do not bend.' Her name and address. A murmur built in the back of her throat. UA? Why would UA send her anything? The answer hit her just as quickly. The practical exam. These were probably her results. Or a rejection letter - sorry, we regret to inform you that despite kicking ass, you're not what we're looking for. Or they wanted her to pay for destroying that oversized villain. Which was bullshit. But whatever their excuse, she refused to think too hard about it.

Because she didn't care even if she *did* kick more than enough ass to get into the stupid school.

"If UA expects me to pay for breaking their stupid robot, they can kiss my ass."

The envelope was thick.

And there was definitely something more than paper inside.

For good measure, she shook it.

Nothing happened.

She reread the stamped message.

Bold, red lettering, huh? That sounded important.

"Oh well..."

Heedless of the consequences behind ignoring something stamped in bold red letters, she grabbed one edge of the letter, tore it open and let everything spill onto the coffee table.

"... huh?"

There were forms.

A graded photocopy of her written exam.

And a small metal -

"BOOYAH! I AM HERE AS A PROJECTION NOW!"

A crimson blade slightly longer than her forearm instinctively stabbed the intruding presence.

"Congratulations, young lady! On behalf of UA, let me be the first to commend your exceptional performance!"

Hair frazzled, heart beating a mile a minute, eyebrow twitching and Quirk shoved through All Might's forehead, Ryuko *seethed* at the wavering hologram.

"Not only did you pass the written exam with flying colors, you earned more than your fair share of combat points," blissfully unaware of the blade lodged between his eyes, or how goddamn

tacky his yellow suit looked, All Might leaned away from the camera and smiled, "Sixty-three points, as a matter of fact! The second-most of any student!"

She stared at the projection.

Her Quirk deactivated.

And surprise quickly shifted into mild annoyance, "Hold on, someone seriously got more points than me?"

"But wait! There's more!"

The camera zoomed out, showing All Might standing next to a screen with clips of her battles against the robots. Including the one where she slipped, fell forward and stumbled face-first to the ground, "The exam was not based on combat ability alone! Heroes serve the community, even if the job isn't particularly glamorous! That's where rescue points come into play! Now, how does this impact you, you might be asking? Good question!"

Someone off-camera pointed impatiently at their wrist.

"Well, sorry," an apologetic shrug should have been impossible for All Might, yet the seven-foot-whatever, perpetually smiling hero either didn't know or didn't care, "While it's true you earned a significant number of combat points, your 'lone wolf' tactics left much to be desired. Yes. That's right, Ryuko. We saw everything. Quite disappointing, young lady."

Her eyebrow spasmed.

"Like I give a -"

A boisterous laugh.

Over-the-top inspirational music.

"Yet you did earn *some* rescue points," before she could prepare herself, physically or mentally, the symbol of peace's enormous smile filling the screen, "How's that possible, you're probably asking yourself! Another good question!"

Not for the first time, and certainly not the last, Ryuko had the urge to shove her Quirk where the sun didn't shine.

It wouldn't work.

But that didn't mean she wouldn't *try* .

"Ahem," stepping away from the camera, All Might coughed, "As you know, an individual hero can't do everything. Even I, many times throughout my career, have required assistance dealing with villains. For it only takes a single mistake. A distraction. Perhaps a villain with an unknown Quirk. Or an intelligent criminal holding hostages. Or as simple as not seeing a weapon until it's too late. Through teamwork and cooperation, a hero not only covers their weaknesses, but those of their comrades."

He coughed once more into his hand.

"I'll admit, while impressive, it wasn't the smartest plan. Or the safest. But the important thing is you worked together! And in the end, that's what truly mattered!"

Her eyebrow twitched again.

"Which is why, after careful deliberation, UA's panel of judges came to a decision," there was a pause, like All Might thought she was sitting on the edge of her seat from anticipation, not the urge to punch him in his perfect jawline, "Twelve rescue points! Each! For you, Kendo Itsuki and Tetsutetsu Tetsutetsu!"

A strange noise escaped her lips.

Twelve points?

Taking down that giant villain was only worth *twelve* points?

"Now, you're probably wondering why you only received twelve points!"

He was still talking.

"And while I'd love to explain their decision, I'm being told to wrap things up. Huh? Yes. I know, but still," he looked off-screen, bewildered, "Thirty seconds? Really? You sure? That's hardly enough time to -"

"Go to hell!"

The miniature device powering the hologram teleported across the room, courtesy of her foot. It collided with the wall next to the window, leaving a small dent she'd need to plaster over, fell onto the carpet, rolled counterclockwise several times and landed upside-down. And with her foot still raised in a high kick, Ryuko collapsed back onto the couch, thoroughly exhausted. She should be upset. *More* upset. About All Might. About UA. And about getting into UA. But that required actually *caring*. But if she didn't care, why was she so goddamn bothered about only twelve points for slicing that robot's head open?

"Ugh!"

Something not quite vulgar lost its way in the cushion pressed against her face.

She didn't know how much time passed.

It could have been seconds. Or minutes. Or hours.

There was only the ticking from the clock in the shape of a cat in the kitchen.

But eventually, surrendering to curiosity, she grabbed the wrinkled pages, smoothed them against her leg and started reading.

"Congratulations, Ryuko Matoi. Allow us to welcome you to..."

"Blah, blah, blah..."

"... for over ninety years, we at UA have striven towards a brighter future for all..."

"Yadda, yadda, yadda..."

"... 300,000 Yen monthly stipend..."

"Pfft, like I need the money..."

"... given your current address, it is recommended you locate appropriate lodgings in Musutafu prior to the school year."

"I gotta find an apartment?"

It shouldn't have surprised her and yet, holding the piece of paper close to her face, she reread everything. Twice. And then once more for good measure. There was more. Something about realtors and a number to call if she had questions. Grumbling from the pit of her stomach, Ryuko leaned back against the couch and stared at the ceiling. Finding an apartment in Musutafu was going to be a pain in the ass. But it beat staying at home. Because the commute sucked. An hour on the bullet train was fine. But twice a day for six days a week for three years? Her face contorted. Disgust. Revulsion. Annoyance.

She'd rather get her teeth pulled than deal with that.

"Guess that means I'm moving out..."

Something inside her chest tightened.

No, this wasn't her home.

Not anymore.

Just painful memories.

She could remember her dad walking through the door, exhausted after spending twelve hours flying home from another conference, asking if she wanted takeout. She could see his smile. Hear his voice. Swallowing the bitterness rising from her stomach, Ryuko forced herself to keep reading.

"... school uniforms... gym uniforms..."

"... health and hazard insurance..."

... fill out and return the enclosed clothing allowance and costume forms two weeks before the start of semester..."

Her thoughts ground to a halt.

A costume.

She needed to design a costume.

In one week.

While finding an apartment in Musutafu *and* getting ready for UA.

As the remaining pages slipped from numb fingers, the entire right side of Ryuko's face twitched.

Chapter 6

"I hate this already."

She'd gotten up early, ate breakfast, grabbed her stuff, locked her apartment, bought another bagel at the bodega on the corner and began the long and boring walk to UA.

Running into Mako had been a surprise.

Maybe stumbling made more sense.

Apparently, her mom and dad lived across town. And she'd been so excited to make a good first impression that she left without eating breakfast. Ryuko could still remember Mako's eyes settling on the half-eaten cream cheese bagel. The questions about 'are you going to eat that, Ryuko?' And the drool. So much drool. She'd tried ignoring Mako. But it had been like trying to ignore a puppy. And so, by the time they passed through UA's security gate, her bagel was long gone. Followed by five minutes of chatting - about her home, old school and Quirk, Mako's dog who wore a sweater or something, Mako's little brother, Mako's Quirk causing their apartment's power to go out at the end of every month and a couple of things she believed were possibly illegal.

Her stomach grumbled.

Why was everyone at UA so freaking weird?

She pulled at her collar.

UA's preppy uniform was the sort of thing she'd vowed never to wear, even on penalty of death. A gray jacket over a long-sleeved white shirt. A blue-green skirt that barely reached her knees. Brown dress shoes with matching socks. And a red tie she'd spent *hours* in front of a mirror practicing how to tie without choking herself. Everything was ironed. Everything was perfectly pressed. And she'd

used enough starch that she was half-certain her uniform could stand on its own. Her day was off to a *phenomenal* start and it wasn't even eight in the morning.

She looked up.

Class 1-A.

This was it.

The beginning of her 'new life.'

Once she walked inside, there was no turning back.

Ryuko stood outside the classroom for more than a minute, staring at the overcompensating door like it would burst into flames at any moment.

"Well, no point waitin'..."

Upon sliding open the door, she immediately noticed two things. One, it was way nicer than her old school. Like, way nicer. State-of-the-art equipment, ultra-modern lighting probably set to the sun or something stupid and fancy desks with reclining chairs. The second thing was that she wasn't the first to arrive. There were five other people. An invisible girl waving at her. A quiet guy in the back with white and red hair she swore looked familiar. A girl with long black hair tied into a spiky ponytail. A tall guy with two pairs of webbed arms. And a old-looking guy with glasses who decided to introduce himself in the weirdest fashion possible.

"Good morning! I'm Tenya Ida," furiously waving his arm in a chopping motion, the newly-named Ida continued, "I'm looking forward to learning alongside you!"

It took her a moment to realize he was waiting for her response.

"Oh, uh," she debated whether to ignore Ida. It felt like a fantastic idea, but if she was going to spend the next three years at UA, she

might as well make some friends, "Ryuko... Matoi."

"Matoi?"

It hit her quickly. The moment she finished, she knew she'd screwed up. She could see the gears in Ida's head spinning, "Professor Isshin Matoi? One of the world's foremost experts on Quirk evolution? It's an honor to meet you! His paper on Quirk inheritance arising predominantly from paternal Quirks was groundbreaking!"

" *Yup* ."

"I, uh," to his credit, Ida realized he'd messed up sooner than she'd thought, because he quickly backed away and coughed into his hand, "My apologies. I should have known better than to broach such a delicate subject."

"It's fine."

She pretended not to care.

This wasn't the first time someone accidentally mentioned her dad.

And it wouldn't be the last.

Her desk was in the first row, fourth from the front, and fortunately nobody else bothered her as she dropped her backpack on the floor and sat down. Yawning into her hand, Ryuko covered her mouth and stared at the wall, eyes unfocused. Time passed, but it might as well have stood still. More people arrived. An eccentric-looking weirdo three seats in front of her. A muscular guy who enthusiastically shook Ida's hand much to the latter's surprise. And a girl with earlobes resembling phone jacks. Everyone had Quirks. And she'd bet anything they could kick ass. Yet as her eyes trailed across the room before returning to the blank wall, one question kept repeating itself in her head.

If All Might was teaching at UA, how the hell would he bring the psychopathic monster who killed her dad to justice?

"Hey, Ryuko."

Tsuyu Asui's desk was number three.

Right in front of hers.

Talk about a lucky coincidence.

They'd known each other since middle school. Some might call them friends. And they'd be right, although the reason behind their friendship was secret, known only to herself, Tsuyu and the bullies who, to this day, were too terrified of telling their parents why they'd come home bruised, bleeding and crying. She was personally proud of that. Seeing her friend in the same class was a breath of fresh air. She felt better. But unlike a normal and socially adjusted individual, she barely reacted beyond an exhausted nod, "Oh, hey, Tsu."

"I still can't believe All Might blackmailed you into attending UA," half a foot of tongue hung from Tsuyu's mouth as she sat down, "That's surprisingly underhanded."

"Don't let that stupid smile fool you."

She shrugged as two people laughed their way into the room - a cheerful girl with pink skin and horns, and an upbeat guy with spiky red hair, "Nobody becomes number one hero in the world by being mister perfect. Besides," propping her foot on her desk, Ryuko threaded her fingers through her hair, "It wasn't like I had anything better to do."

Maybe that was nonsense.

But nobody knew it was nonsense and she wouldn't give a shit even if they did.

Tsuyu croaked.

"You know, Ryu, if you changed your mind, you could have just said so," she and Habuko hadn't believed Ryuko's strange excuse. They'd known her long enough to realize when she was making something up, "You didn't need to come up with a crazy story about All Might acting like a villain, ribbit."

She refused to acknowledge that.

"OH MY GOD!"

Yellow eyes surrounded by pitch black sclera spotted Ryuko moments after she walked into her homeroom. Pink hair fluttered as she homed upon the other girl faster than anybody could react. Not even Kirishima. She was positively excited! And by the time she reached the blood-manipulating teenager's desk, Mina Ashida had already began spilling her deepest secrets, "I CAN'T BELIEVE IT'S REALLY YOU!"

The sheer *enthusiasm* overwhelmed Ryuko, "... huh?"

"You're the one who destroyed that humongous robot during the test," before Ryuko could recompose her thoughts, Mina leaned forward, all smiles and sunshine, "C'mon! Give me the details! How'd you pull it off? What super move did you use? What's your Quirk!? C'mon! Spill it!"

"Uh..."

From his seat, Denki Kaminari whistled, "Wait - that was you?"

"It was amazing!" a beaming grin answered his question, "Like something from an action movie!" now furiously pumping her fist over and over, Mina repeated every detail she could remember. Which wasn't much. But that didn't stop her from improvising, "She was all Hiya! And Pow! And Wa-taah! With a little Wham!"

"Uhh..."

"Oh man, that's hardcore," Eijiro Kirishima leaned around Mina, "Your Quirk must be crazy strong."

"Uhhh..."

"So c'mon, what's your Quirk?" alternating between clasping her hands and pumping her fist, Mina whined, "Tell meeeeeee..."

"....uhh?"

"That's enough questions," it would be a bold-faced lie to suggest he wasn't modestly curious about Ryuko's Quirk, if only from a strictly philosophical point of view. But that didn't stop Ida from interceding on her behalf, "I'm certain Miss Matoi will demonstrate her Quirk in due time!"

"Hey."

Someone, however, didn't get the message.

He had explosive blond hair, an expression straddling the line between 'pissed off' and 'stick up his ass' and shoved his way through the crowd. He also wasn't wearing a tie, something which annoyed her *far* more than his vulgar personality and short temper. If she knew the dress code was that lax, she would have tossed her ties into the trash. But that particularly personal frustration was quickly and violently overshadowed when the asshole opened his mouth a second time, "You're that extra who decimated that worthless villain, aren't you?"

Extra?

Her foot slid off the desk.

Did he *seriously* just call her an extra?

"Huh, that's a funny way of asking for advice," she half-snorted, half-scoffed.

He glared at her.

She *snorted* harder.

This was a battle of attrition.

Whoever gave up first, lost.

She knew it.

He knew it.

"Forget it," and as expected, the blond punk was the first to blink. Snarling like a mutt choking on the end of its leash, he stalked away, spitting impotent insults that would probably hurt more if he weren't running with his tail between his legs, "You probably mooched off someone else's Quirk. No way a nobody like you could pull off something like that."

She watched his leave.

And if not for the witnesses and her desire to make a good first impression, would have given him a certain gesture.

"Well, that could have gone worse, Ryu," a ribbit, followed by blunt honesty, summed Tsuyu's reaction.

"Nah - punks like him are all bark and no bite," slouching in her seat, Ryuko ignored the migraine pushing against the inside of her skull, "If you don't back down, they give up. And if they don't give up, you kick their ass until they surrender."

"You're kidding me, right? Your old school shove a stick up your ass or were you born with it?"

Her eyes snapped towards the front of the room, where another confrontation was unfolding between the Ida and the blond delinquent.

"Hey, Ryu?"

She heard Tsu, but didn't answer until determining they were at a relatively safe distance from the imminent explosion," Yeah?"

"This might be personal, but are the rumors true?"

The red bang sweeping above her left eye dimmed, physically confessing the sinking nausea roiling her stomach, "What rumors?"

"Well, a few weeks after you ran away, someone attacked Seiai," Tsuyu stared at the ceiling, finger against her chin and lost in thought, "Nobody knows who they were, but Habuko's friend's sister goes there. And apparently you look a lot like whoever -"

"If you're just here to make friends, then you can pack up your stuff now."

It was a miracle.

Ryuko didn't know how or why, but she wasn't about to complaining when someone interrupted Tsuyu. But out of morbid curiosity, she picked her head up. Ida and two other people looked shocked. Or maybe surprised. Mortified? And... terrified? At something. Or something.

"Welcome to UA's hero course."

Even if she couldn't see anyone, she could still *hear* their exhaustion, "It took eight seconds before you all shut up. That's not going to work. Time is precious. Rational students would understand that."

A man stepped into the classroom, his eyes tired and bloodshot.

"Hello, I'm Shouta Aizawa. Your teacher."

He looked familiar.

"Now, before we begin, I need to do roll call," shambling towards the lectern at the front of the room, the self-professed teacher rolled his sleeping bag, tucked it away, pulled out a phone and looked around, "When I call your name, answer present. Understand?"

"Yuga Aoyama."

"Mina Ashido."

"Tsuyu Asui."

"Katsuki Bakugo."

"Toru Hagakure."

"Tenya Ida."

"Kyoka Jiro."

"Denki Kaminari."

"Eijiro Kirishima."

"Koji Koda."

"Ryuko Matoi."

"Izuku Midoriya."

"Minoru Mineta."

"Rikido Sato."

"Hanta Sero."

"Mezo Shoji."

"Shoto Todoroki."

"Fumikage Tokoyami."

"Ochaco Uraraka."

"Momo Yaoyorozu."

"Alright," in the same bored tone, he pointed out the window,
"Change into your gym uniforms and meet me outside."

Chapter 7

If someone mentioned 'Quirk Assessment Test' and 'UA' in the same breath, the first things that would come to mind were robots, high-intensity obstacle courses and combat training in urban environments suspiciously similar to her new neighborhood. Something difficult. Something challenging.

Not... *this* .

"... Ochako Uraraka."

Instead of orientation they were taking eight tests to 'gauge their potential.'

Whoever came in last would be expelled, no ifs, ands or buts.

Talk about 'no pressure.'

It had to be a bluff. Negative motivation. Reverse psychology. But the freaking sadist's grin kicked that idea clear out of the ballpark. He was damn serious. And the way his eyes swept towards her, the blond punk and the green haired nervous wreck meant this wasn't random. It was a scam. He knew who he would expel. And that pissed her off enough to take the assessment test seriously. At first. One hundred and ten percent effort. Motivated not by expulsion, but daydreams of shoving their teacher inside his sleeping bag, tying a few rocks to the bottom and tossing him into the nearest river. Her motivation lasted as long as the grip strength test. By the third event, she'd only tried hard enough to clear the sandbox.

And by the fourth, she'd realized the truth.

It was bullshit.

This wasn't an assessment test, it was a junior high track meet. Only with Quirks. And significantly less boring. Tsuyu had her froggy

powers. Ida his weird jet-engine-calves. The punk explosion-boosted past the finish line. Some guy with a laser shooting out of his stomach sparkled through records. Everyone was using Quirks. Everyone except her and the nervous kid. But even if her Quirk were pretty much useless for repeated side steps or the standing long jump, after four events, Ryuko could say she was doing alright. At least in the top ten.

Well, she wouldn't be coming in dead last.

Which was good enough.

"Geez," as the ball floated higher and higher, eventually disappearing into the upper stratosphere with a noticeable twinkle, she whistled, "That has to be cheating."

"INFINITY!?"

Kaminari's bewilderment was surpassed only by his surprise, "Infinity!? That's insane! How's that possible?"

He'd intended on collecting it the old-fashioned way, but since it was too late to have Ochako Uraraka cancel Zero Gravity without the ball hitting the ground - or more likely, someone standing on the ground - at terminal velocity, leading to a lawsuit for UA and everyone involved, Aizawa cut his losses. Once it breached the atmosphere and reached low orbit, Quirk or not, the ball wasn't coming back. Which left one option on the table.

"Alright, you're up."

Extracting another ball from the depths of his scarf, Aizawa lazily tossed it at Ryuko, "And use your Quirk."

Her dour expression would've overwhelmed a lesser man.

"I'm going to say you played sports in junior high. That explains your scores in the 50-Meter Dash and Standing Long Jump. However, this

is an assessment of your Quirk, *not* how fast you can run. Or how far you can jump," his tone uncharacteristically hardened, yet sounded no less exhausted, "I'm aware your Quirk is combat-oriented, but that's no excuse to not try. Quirks are like muscles, they cannot grow stronger without training. To go beyond one's limitations... to exceed one's boundaries... requires more than a powerful Quirk. It requires dedication and perseverance. Those were Professor Mato's words, were they not?"

The corner of Ryuko's mouth twitched.

"So, either use your Quirk or pack your things and go home," Aizawa lazily waved over his shoulder as he walked back towards his former position, "Oh, and try not to throw the ball into orbit. They're not exactly cheap."

Instead of acknowledging the unsubtle warning, Ryuko stepped inside the circle.

The field was longer than expected. At least a kilometer. Then trees and a forest for another couple kilometers. And there was a slight wind. Exhaling loudly, then breathing in through her nose, she tried steadying her thoughts, but the threat kept beating itself against her skull. It ruined her concentration, leaving her grumbling and worse for wear. Expelled for not using her Quirk was one thing, but who gave him the right to mention her dad? Only a supreme effort kept her from saying something that *would* get her sent home before lunch on the first day of class.

"Hey!"

He knew her Quirk wasn't meant for throwing a ball. But that didn't mean she wouldn't try, if only to shove it down the sadist's throat, "Do I have to *throw* the ball or -"

Aizawa shrugged, "As long as you use your Quirk, anything's fair game."

"So," adrift from the rest of Class 1-A, Ida pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, "We'll finally see her Quirk."

"Hey, you're friends with Ryuko, right?" Mina leaned closer to Tsuyu, "She seems super grumpy. Is she always like this? Or is she just having a bad day?"

Carefully considering the question, Tsuyu touched her chin, "Ryuko's always like this."

"And her Quirk?"

An amused ribbit predated Tsuyu smiling, "It's kind of like her, you know? A Ryuko Quirk through and through. It's honestly hard to imagine her having any other Quirk."

"Huh!?"

Ryuko heard everyone.

And while she appreciated Tsu's efforts, hearing her friend talk about her in such vague terms almost felt insulting.

Grumpy?

She wasn't grumpy!

But shoving that to the furthest corner of her mind until lunch, or the next time she could talk to Tsu in private, Ryuko focused. She breathed. She held out her arm and reached deep inside. A cool warmth. A familiar tickle spreading from her fingertips to her shoulder. It started as a trickle. But once she clenched her fingers and *pulled*, the thick globules emerging from her skin emerging from her skin exploded into a crimson stream. A visceral deluge of viscous fluid audibly clashing against her gym uniform. It happened faster than a heartbeat and quicker than Aizawa needed to blink, leaving Ryuko hefting a makeshift bat surprisingly resembling a blunt sword onto her shoulder.

Izuku Midoriya wasn't the first to react.

But he was the first to speak the question on everybody's mind, "Is that... blood?"

"Yup, ribbit," unlike some of her classmates, who appeared squeamish and nauseated, Tsuyu was unfazed, "That's Ryuko's Quirk."

"A Quirk that manipulates one's own blood," Ida stroked his chin. An uncommon Quirk. His brother had worked alongside heroes possessing similar Quirks - growing bones, building muscle mass and more than a few capable of contorting their hair into various shapes and forms. But none involving blood, "I've never heard of such a thing."

While her classmates muttered - and Bakugo's eyebrow violently twitched- Uraraka covered her mouth, turned away and tried not to throw up.

"Hmph."

A smirk spread across Ryuko's face while her grip tightened, squeezing semi-malleable blood until it conformed to her fingers. The bat shimmered, individual sheets of blood hardening and softening. She chuckled. Her eyes homed on a spot way in the distance. Just beyond Bakugo's record. After lazily bouncing the ball a couple of times, each a little higher than the last, snatched it midair, "Let's see how far I can hit this stupid thing."

Without a moment's hesitation, she tossed the ball upwards.

Her left foot slid forward.

Her sneaker dragged through the dirt.

She tightened her stance.

She gripped the makeshift bat with both hands.

And once the ball started falling, waited until it was nearly eye-level before *swinging*.

CRACK!

Ryuko froze. Nothing else accurately described that single moment of time. That millisecond between thoughts. Her eyes widened. Her mouth parted in a strangled choke as countless shards of metal and plastic rained onto the ground. They peppered her face and clung to her hair. They bounced off her arms and shoulders. And as time resumed, fast-forwarding in the blink of an eye, everyone in Class 1-A with several notable exceptions collectively gasped.

"Did she just break the ball?"

"Well, you didn't throw the ball into orbit."

The phone in Aizawa's hand displayed a series of error messages, numbers and a large red 'X' he helpfully showed Ryuko, "Unfortunately, you still failed."

Say what!?

"It's not your fault the ball broke. That's what you're going to say, isn't it?" from Ryuko's silence, her desperate grasping for an excuse, Aizawa knew he'd hit the bullseye, "You have power, but you lack discipline. And control. You thought 'I'm going to hit the ball as hard as I can' instead of 'how hard should I hit the ball.' In a real battle, life and death comes down to split-second decisions where even the slightest delay might lead to someone's death. You can't give into emotion. You can't let things get personal. You were so intent on proving me wrong, that you decided upon hitting the ball at full power. Am I wrong?"

Power, technique and control.

The three cornerstones of Quirks.

"Of course, I never said anything about destroying the ball, so that's my fault."

He noticed it during the funeral.

An inferno requiring a single spark to ignite into something impossible to contain once released.

"That's why I'm giving you a second chance," he tossed another ball to Ryuko, "Now try again. And don't destroy this one, or I'll send you home. *And* make you pay to replace it. So, no pressure."

Ryuko shifted uncomfortably on her feet.

It was an odd feeling. A mixture of embarrassment, wounded pride and frustration. The silence was deafening, but that only made things a lot worse. An unnoticeable blush blossomed across her face, hidden by an overcorrected annoyed grunt. The bastard had some nerve saying she lacked discipline. How the hell was she supposed to know breaking the ball wasn't allowed if he never mentioned it. As long as she used her Quirk, anything was fair game. Those were his freaking exact words! Her grip on the ball tightened, gradually contorting the plastic-metal compound. She breathed deeply, steadied her nerves and forcing the asshole's warning to the deepest corner of her mind, tossed the ball into the air, watched it reach its peak before slowing returning to earth.

The ball, slightly cracked yet intact and in one piece, shot down the field.

As Class 1-A's collective gasps of awe, surprise and astonishment reached critical mass, Aizawa held up the phone.

"Five hundred and thirty-four point five meters!?"

"Alright," ignoring the message concerning damage to the ball's sensors, Aizawa skipped several names before settling on one at random, "Mezo Soji, you're up."

She was annoyed.

She was irritated.

But the look on Bakugo's face was *worthy* every moment of embarrassment.

"How unorthodox," as she marched back into the group, Tsuyu and Mina on one side, Kirishima on the other, Ryuko heard someone muttering, "Why didn't I think of that?"

It was the tall girl.

Momo.

The one who created the sprinting cleats using her Quirk.

"Mister Aizawa," stabbing her arm upwards, Momo afforded Soji the utmost respect, waiting until he finished before speaking, "Might I retake my turn?"

"There are no do-overs in heroics," Aizawa answered without tearing his eyes away from his phone, eliciting a veiled wince, "Do you think a villain will stand back and let you recover because you messed up?" with the conversation effectively over, he read the number on the screen before picking someone out of the crowd, "Izuku Midoriya."

The nervous-looking kid swallowed the lump in his throat.

But something else caught her eye.

All Might.

The number one hero was hiding behind a building.

And worse, he was wearing that horribly tacky yellow suit.

She stared at him.

He stared back.

She opened her mouth.

He desperately waved his arms.

She rolled her eyes.

Turning around only to see Midoriya standing in the circle, staring at the ball like was about to launch itself at his face, Ryuko scoffed, "Freakin' weirdo."

Chapter 8

She'd thought UA would be different than junior high, but nope. It was still school. Classes. Lunch. And homework. *A lot* of homework. English. History. Math. Science. Heroics. 'Plus Ultra' apparently meant going above and beyond shoving homework down their throats.

Talk about cream of the crop.

And people *wanted* to go to UA?

It was ridiculous.

"And I was lying. No one's going home. That was just a rational deception to make sure you gave it your all in the tests."

Her eye twitched. Then twitched again. She could still hear his smug laughter. And that weird smile. It pissed her off. A rational deception? No goddamn way! He'd been serious about kicking someone out of UA. Or he was a psychopath who liked toying with their emotions for shits and giggles, which was worse. Or maybe better. And then there was the kid who'd broken his finger throwing the ball. Deku or something weird. That was a shit-ton of power. And strange. Her Quirk had drawbacks. Every Quirk had drawbacks. But she'd never heard of a Quirk that shattered bones every time it was used.

And she would know.

Her dad had studied Quirks like they were going out of freaking style.

But that wasn't important.

Because for better or worse, she'd survived her first day.

She could finally head home and -

"RRRRRRRRYYYYYYYYUUUUUUUKKKKKKOOOO!"

Hands in her pockets, backpack slung over her shoulder and hair still frazzled from Kaminari demonstrating his Quirk during the distance run for some weird reason, Ryuko sidestepped the approaching missile at the last possible moment. She felt, rather than saw, Mako's beaming smile shift into bewildered confusion when her arms didn't grab anything. But before Mako slammed face-first into the ground, tumbled head over foot and crashed into a garbage can, her arm snapped out. Latching onto her 'bestie's' collar right before Mako jumped out of range, she yanked backwards, watched Mako's legs and arms dancing like a caught insect and *then* gently placed her new friend down.

"Oh, hey, Mako."

Unaware of her close brush with death and visit to Recovery Girl, Mako was unfazed when her backpack - adorned with bunnies and launched skyward at the moment Ryuko caught her - landed in her best friend's other hand, "How was your hero stuff, Ryuko? Fun and exciting, I bet."

"Nah, not really," having finished her good deed for the day, Ryuko tossed Mako her backpack.

"That doesn't sound right," perplexed to the point of confusion, Mako pouted, realized she'd been left alone and hurried to catch up, "Did you go to the wrong class or something?"

"I'm pretty sure I didn't."

"Are you sure?" Mako asked with too much emphasis to be taken seriously, "Because I went to the wrong class this morning, only there was this nice guy who accidentally brainwashed me when I asked him for directions. Which sounds bad, but turns out, we're in the same class, plus he's really nice."

Ryuko didn't catch anything on the first go.

Or the second.

Or the third.

But on Mako's confession's fourth cycle, her brain finally caught up, "Wait. What? Brainwashing?"

"Ryuko?"

Another voice interrupted her before she could ask Mako to elaborate what she meant about 'brainwashing' or if it was another figment of her imagination. Like living next to a group of Yakuza. Or the underground fighting ring down the street. One hand holding onto her backpack, she turned around and saw Kendo walking towards them with someone she didn't recognize and who immediately looked suspicious, "Oh... Kendo, right?"

"It's good to see you," the ginger haired heroine-in-training's teal eyes swept from Ryuko to the girl standing next to her before ending in a wave, "Guess you're in Class 1-A, huh?"

"Yup," she shrugged, her voice drier than a desert, "So, was your day as fun and exciting as ours?"

"Well..."

Kendo clapped her hands nervously yet enthusiastically, almost as if she couldn't decide which was worse, "Vlad King had us demonstrate our Quirks. How they work. What our limits are. It was interesting, but to be honest, forming teams might be difficult. Some of our Quirks work better together than others. And other Quirks aren't useful for fighting. It depends on whether Vlad King creates our teams or if he lets us pick our own teams. What about you? I'm sure your orientation was boring."

She tried answering.

Unfortunately, she didn't have the opportunity to do so when the guy next to Kendo shoved his way into their conversation with a smarmy grin.

"Neito Monoma," with a smile, he held out his hand, "A pleasure to meet you."

All the red flags were waving in her mind.

He was up to something.

She could *smell* it.

"Sorry," without caring about manners, decorum or camaraderie, Ryuko slapped away Monoma's hand, "No offense, but you're a little too creepy for my tastes."

That should have been the end of it.

But it wasn't.

"Well. Well. That was easier than I thought."

Monoma's annoying voice, already smug enough to piss her off without trying, somehow evolved to a level she'd only theorized, "Now, let's see what makes you special."

A crimson substance flowed between his fingers.

Blood.

And it was like someone punched the breath from her lungs, "What the - ?"

"He pulled the same stunt on Tetsutetsu," unfazed by her classmate's apparent treachery, Kendo sighed into her hand, "Monoma's Quirk is Copy. As in - "

"Oh my god! He stole Ryuko's Quirk!"

Ryuko ignored Mako's spontaneous declaration, but just to be safe, she twisted a few droplets of blood between her fingers.

She still had her Quirk.

Good.

For her.

Not for Monoma.

Her expression immediately collapsed underneath the overbearing weight of annoyance and frustration. This was freaking terrific. Her first day at UA, and she'd not only had a sadistic bastard for a homeroom teacher, she'd run into some punk who copied Quirks. *Wonderful*. Sucking in heaping scoops of midafternoon spring, Ryuko rolled her up sleeves, purposely made of show of violently cracking her knuckles and prepared to teach an oblivious Monoma a few lessons about stealing shit that didn't belong to him. But Kendo seemed to realize her plans, because before she stepped between them, hands larger than average and a nervous smile stretching from cheek to cheek.

"Don't mind him, Ryuko! It's just Monoma's way of introducing himself," Kendo helpfully, in her mind, pointed out, hoping it was enough to dissolve the situation.

It wasn't helpful.

It didn't make her *not* want to punch him in the face.

But as Mako watched Monoma manipulate his blood as if he hadn't copied her Quirk without written permission, something else bothered her. Ryuko couldn't quite place her finger on it. It was important. She wracked her brain. Yet it was like an itch she couldn't scratch. No matter how hard she tried, it was like water slipping between her fingers. Until Monoma started experimenting with larger

and larger weapons. A double-bladed lance. A massive sword. A sword and shield combination. Everything became clear.

"Hey, fyi," while she would normally watch everything unfold from the sidelines, Ryuko nevertheless lazily raised her finger "You should probably not - "

The copycat was too wrapped up enjoying himself to listen.

And so, having tried warning him, Ryuko retreated to her original plan of doing nothing.

"Such an interesting power."

He cycled through several weapons. An intricate rapier with a fleur-de-lis carved into the pommel. A set of daggers sharp enough to slice through the air itself. A long sword twice the length of his arm. Monoma didn't stop. He couldn't stop, not even as his face paled and his heart rate skyrocketed, "To believe someone... like you... had... this... ability..."

A second later, he tilted sideways and fell to the ground.

Ryuko knew she should feel something. Anger. Guilt. Remorse. Excitement. Truth be told, she still wanted to deck Monoma for copying her Quirk. But this was a rare opportunity for her to see how her Quirk worked from the outside. Did that make her a bad person? She didn't think so. It didn't make her a good person. Or a good hero. Then again, she technically wasn't a hero. Not yet. So, while Kendo gasped and Mako's scattered thoughts took a moment to catch up to reality, Ryuko watched Monoma's latest contraption - a double-bladed katana - liquify into a puddle and ooze into his twitching fingers.

It happened fairly quickly.

Taking little more than a second from start to finish, leaving him breathing normally.

And giving her no incentive to bite her tongue and *not* speak her mind.

"Serves him right for snatching my Quirk."

Kendo, however, was more confused than panicked, "Is he going to be okay?"

"Who cares?" she shrugged, caring little, if that, about the thieving prick from Class 1-B, "I say we leave him and go home."

"No way!"

And just like that, Mako was off to the races.

"I know he didn't ask permission to look at your homework, Ryuko, but you can't just leave him lying on the ground like yesterday's newspaper!" Ryuko slouched alongside a surprised Kendo, both equally confused and bewildered by the illogical train of logic, "It's obvious to me this guy - " Mako motioned toward the unconscious Monoma, " - is a yarn ball of super jealousy since his Quirk doesn't work without other Quirks! Like an essay written in orange crayon! His self-esteem is lower than my dad's taxes! It's super sad. I hide my feelings with imaginary friends, but not everybody can do that!"

Kendo's head tilted sideways, "Wha...?"

"More importantly, if I learned anything helping my dad steal from the hospital, blood loss is a serious emergency!" Mako slid towards Monoma, pumping both arms and puffing her cheeks, "People die when they're killed by blood loss! That's why you gotta save him even if he acts like an ineffective Saturday morning villain, Ryuko!"

Ryuko stared at Mako.

Then forced herself to look at Monoma.

"Nah, he's fine," she nudged the prick with her foot, earning a weak groan, "Yup. Still breathing."

"Well, I'd better take him to the nurse's office," grabbing her 'friend,' for lack of a better term to describe someone she'd met only a few hours earlier, in her oversized hands, Kendo sighed. Again, "See you tomorrow, Ryuko."

Ryuko watched her leave.

And once Kendo disappeared into UA, resumed storming her way towards the bus station.

"What's wrong, Ryuko?" keeping pace every step of the way while leaning forward despite her overstuffed backpack pulling in the opposite direction, Mako tilted her head, first one way, then the other, before blurting out the first thing that came to her mind, "You look super grumpy."

"He had my Quirk for *five seconds* and could make better shit than me," she didn't elaborate. She didn't need to. It ticked her off. It *pissed* her off. If the prick hadn't knocked himself out, she would have punched him. It was her Quirk. She was born with it. She could remember the first time she used it - on the playground after getting dirt kicked on her face. And her dad's reaction. That's why she was pissed. That and not having the chance to introduce his nose to her eager knuckles. But that was that. Her chance was gone.

And so, staring at the sidewalk between her feet, thoroughly annoyed at everything and everyone without any means of calming down, Ryuko kept walking.

"Yeah, that's a real bummer," Mako's bluntness was matched only by her eagerness to help her bestie, "But if you're so down in the dumps, maybe you should practice?"

"Practice?"

"Like mom says whenever dad couldn't afford something - you can't keep coasting through life on talent and good looks," Mako explained as if it were the best advice in the world.

"... I guess that sorta makes sense."

It didn't.

But it gave her an idea.

And her mood slipped into the gutter.

As if she didn't already have enough homework.

Chapter 9

"I AM HERE..."

It was only his immeasurable control over One for All's fading embers that the door, its frame and surrounding wall didn't shatter, "... COMING THROUGH THE DOOR LIKE A HERO!"

"I can't believe it's really All Might!"

"So, he's a teacher? This year's gonna be awesome!"

"Lessons from All Might? Talk about first-hand experience!"

"Hmm..."

"Ugh..."

"Hey, look," as Ryuko's irritation melded with the excitement and enthusiasm electrifying the room, Tsuyu croaked, "Is he wearing his silver age costume?"

"Welcome to the most important class at UA HIGH!" strutting towards the lectern, All Might punctuated every word with boisterous exultation. He prefaced each syllable with another grin. Midoriya might possess One for All and would one day earn his mantle as the world's symbol of peace, but that day wasn't today and he didn't play favorites. Above all else, he was a teacher. There were plenty of talented students eager to spread their wings and soar through the skies as up-and-coming heroes! And there were students who required nudges in the right direction, "Think of it as Heroing 101! Here you will learn the basics of being a pro! And what it means to fight in the name of good and justice!"

This was the point he'd normally give an inspiring speech about honesty, integrity and always remaining true to oneself.

The speech was tucked in his belt.

"So, prepare yourselves - " unfortunately, he barely had an hour left in this form, no thanks to intervening in multiple crimes on his way to UA," - for genuine combat training!"

"Fight training!"

"Real combat?"

"But before getting our hands dirty, one of the keys to being a hero is... LOOKING GOOD!" there was perfect timing. Then there was voice-activation. Upon enunciating the necessary phrase, four shelves slowly emerged from the wall adjacent to the windows, each holding five cases not only sorted by seat number, but stamped with the student's name, just to be on the safe side, "These were designed for you based on your Quirk Registration Forms and the requests you sent in before school started!"

Another flex, pose and beaming smile.

"Now, it takes real talent to look as good as me," this time, he depressed a button, deactivating the electronic locks preventing anyone from opening their cases, "That's why UA only partners with the best of the best when it comes to designing costumes for up-and-coming heroes - Revocs!"

"Revocs!?"

Uraraka couldn't believe it. And from the stunned silence, she wasn't the only one, "Aren't they super expensive and ultra-exclusive?"

A few seats away, Momo Yaoyorozu blushed as she tried not thinking about her bedroom's walk-in closet.

No longer capable of containing herself, physically or emotionally, and downright giddy, Mina clasped her hands, "I've always wanted to wear something by Revocs!"

"Alright, students! Get yourselves suited up and then meet me at Training Ground Beta!"

He would have loved answering questions. As a teacher, it was his duty to educate young minds. But his time in this form was diminishing by the second and there were a few things he needed to finish setting up, "Now, watch how a pro leaves a room... AT FULL SPEED!"

And he was gone.

Out the door and down the hall before Ryuko finished yawning.

The silence following his departure lasted less than a second.

"At long last," extracting the case containing his costume with delicacy normally afforded to ephemeral shadows, Tokoyami nodded, "A chance to become one with the darkness."

"Talk about high-grade," Kirishima chuckled, a bead of sweat dripping down his cheek, "This stuff costs more than a computer!"

"What did you expect? Revocs is one of the world's leading producer of support items," Ida answered while examining his own costume. He'd assumed UA outsourced costume design to a small company. Perhaps a local manufacturer. One on-campus. Not an international conglomerate whose designs catered to both professional heroes and civilians, "It's logical they'd use only the best materials. Although, if I'd known Revocs would be designing my costume, I would have gone into more detail on the request form."

Conversation soon gave way to muttering as Class 1-A filed into the hallway.

"Aren't you going to look at your costume?"

Lingering towards the back of the group, unopened case tucked underneath her arm and tie looser than yesterday, Ryuko shrugged

off Tsuyu's question, "Nope. Couldn't care less."

Several people - including Todoroki, for some baffling reason - reacted to her honesty in different ways. But by this point they were walking downwards and she was focused on not tripping. Again. She'd never cared about fashion. Not about buying new clothes, matching clothes, the whatever the pros advertised between Sunday morning cartoons. Spending so much time and money on stuff she'd only wear once sounded stupid. Incredibly stupid. She'd rather go outside, go to the movies or hang out at the mall. Something actually fun.

"What if Revocs got something wrong?"

"Who cares."

Less confused and more curious, Tsuyu tapped her mouth, "Then why are you sulking, Ryu?"

"I'm not - "

An embarrassed growl struggled its way towards freedom before she clamped her teeth shut, "Look. It's just a costume. It ain't like it's anything important."

My Bloody Academia

TWENTY MINUTES LATER

He'd faced numerous evildoers, villains and criminals.

International syndicates.

The worst of the worst.

Scum who'd toyed with the lives of others.

Yet they paled in comparison to a single annoyed teenage girl.

Maintaining his infamous grin, albeit strained by Ryuko's swirling emotions nobody other than himself appeared to notice, All Might pretended there was something interesting about the building in the opposite direction. Anything to not look at her. But as soon as he cast his gaze aside, he remembered he was supposed to be teaching. Twenty young minds waiting for instruction. Class 1-A was counting on him. He was the symbol of peace! The pedestal upon which society rested its hopes and dreams! He'd stared down the worst of the worst and emerged victorious!

"She's so angry!"

He hid his nervousness with a loud clearing of his throat.

Ryuko was annoyed. At something. That much was certain. That her ire wasn't directed at him was monumentally important, for it meant her grudge over his admittedly unorthodox method of nudging her into applying to UA had simmered to a more manageable frustration. No, she was frustrated with something else. But what? And as he wracked his brain, the answer became obvious. The twitching of her hands. Her slouched posture. Her intent on blaming anyone but herself. Yes, there was no mistake. For whatever reason, Ryuko wasn't particularly fond of her new costume.

Which was ridiculous!

It was a fantastic costume, neither showy nor provocative!

A semipermeable dark blue or black flexible armor covered everything below her chin. Crimson lines resembling suspenders connected her shoulders to a knee-length pleated skirt adorned with polished silver protrusions. Boots designed to not slip even on the slipperiest of surfaces.

Perhaps it wasn't as spectacular as David's handiwork, but Revocs didn't do anything half-measured.

"Right!"

Pushing those thoughts firmly out of mind, he resumed his prepared speech, "Now that you're suited up and ready, it's time for combat training!"

"Sir, this is one of the fake cities from the entrance exam," Ida raised his arm, interrupting the hero, "Does that mean we'll be conducting urban battles again?"

It was a good question.

"Not quite!"

Just not the right question.

"I'm going to move you two steps ahead! As you know, most of the villain fights you see on the news take place outside," prefacing his explaining with a deep grunt, he raised two of his fingers, "However, statistically speaking, run-ins with the most dastardly evildoers take place *indoors* ! Back-room deals! Hostages! Home invasions! Drug rings! Secret underground lairs! Truly intelligent criminals stay hidden in the shadows!"

His smile faltered.

Home invasions?

Damn it, why did he have to say that?

Luckily Ryuko didn't appear to have noticed his slip of the tongue.

"Now, for this training exercise, you'll be split into teams of good guys and bad guys and fight two-on-two indoor battles!"

Tsuyu frowned, "Isn't this a little advanced?"

"Not at all!"

Her question was better than Ida's, but without sufficient time to explain, All Might clenched his hand, "The best training is what you get on the battlefield! You're not just punching robots this time! You're dealing with actual people! They'll fight back! They'll improvise, change tactics and seek any advantage to win! So, don't think victory is guaranteed because you have powerful Quirk!"

"Sir, will you be deciding who wins?"

"How much can we hurt the other team?"

"Do we need to worry about the losers getting expelled like earlier?"

"Will you be splitting us up based on chance or comparative skill?"

"Are we allowed to cheat?"

"Gah! So many questions!"

All Might suppressed a cough.

The next generation of heroes truly possessed boundless enthusiasm and curiosity. Their barrage of questions was nearly overwhelming! Of course, young Bakugo was eager to test his limits. And Ida wished to know how he'd divide the class into teams. Then there was Ryuko. Practicality and pragmatism were key aspects for any successful hero. A hero needed to make tough calls! And villains, no matter how polite or respectful, never played by the same rules. But there was a fine line between thinking outside the box and cheating.

"Now, the situation is this!"

His voice ended any further questioning.

"In a daring daylight raid, a pair of villains have taken hostages - the prefecture's governor and his daughter," All Might pointed towards a building down the street, "These dastardly evildoers are holed up

THAT BUILDING! And are demanding the release of several dangerous criminals in exchange for their safe return!"

The students were listening.

"Which brings us to the point of today's combat exercise! The heroes must foil their plans! To do that, the good guys must either safely extract the hostages to a predetermined spot outside the building or catch the evildoers. Likewise, those playing the bad guys succeed if they capture the heroes or prevent them from rescuing their victims. There's also another objective! If, for whatever reason, the hostages are rendered 'deceased,' both teams automatically fail the exercise!"

Momo raised her hand, "Why fail, sir?"

"It's probably because the villains need the hostages," Midoriya explained without stopping to catch his breath, "Without the hostages, there's nothing stopping the heroes from just attacking. But at the same time, the hostages are important. Even if the villains are arrested, their deaths would be a major blow to the government."

"EXACTLY!"

All Might pulled a yellow box out of nowhere, "Now, since time is limited, we'll choose teams by drawing lots! NOW LET'S DRAW!"

Team A: Izuku Midoriya & Ochaco Uraraka

Team B: Denki Kaminari & Kyoka Jiro

Team C: Fumikage Tokoyami & Ryuko Matoi

Team D: Rikido Sato & Koji Koda

Team E: Yuga Aoyama & Minoru Mineta

Team F: Mina Ashido & Tsuyu Asui

Team G: Shoto Todoroki & Mezo Shoji

Team H: Katsuki Bakugo & Tenya Ida

Team I: Eijiro Kirishima & Hanta Sero

Team J: Toru Hagakure & Momo Yaoyorozu

He shuffled the orbs.

Then randomly split them between two boxes - one black and the other white, "I declare that the first teams to fight will be... THESE GUYS! Team A will be the heroes! Team H will be the villains! Now, let's get STARTED!"

Chapter 10

Sinking her teeth into the soft bandage, Ryuko quickly yanked her head back, tearing through the fabric before spitting out a few strands of cotton. And then she continued wrapping layers upon layers of fabric around her forearm. The pain was gone. The bleeding had long since stopped. And her costume, brand new and probably expensive, was torn, everything below the elbow missing. But if All Might asked her one more time if she needed to go to the nurse's office, she was going to drive her knee into his crotch, consequences be damned.

She understood he probably had to ask her.

For legal reasons.

Or because he felt incredibly guilty.

But it wasn't like she broke every bone in her goddamn arm.

Not like that Midoriya kid.

A broken finger? No sweat. She'd broken her thumb once or twice. But breaking every bone in his arm? After *one* punch? *Every* time he used his Quirk? She didn't have a degree. But it didn't take a genius to realize Midoriya had no clue how his Quirk worked or how to control it. If she didn't know better, it was almost like he'd gotten his Quirk for his birthday or something. But that was bullshit. Quirk weren't like presents or coupons. You couldn't just get one. Shut them off, maybe, but remove them?

"Congratulations!"

Unaware of her current train of thought, All Might addressed the nineteen remaining students of Class 1-A, "Both teams fought valiantly! Unfortunately, or rather fortunately for the hostages, the heroes were the winners of the second match! There were some

minor injuries, yes, but hero work doesn't come without sacrifice," predicating the statement with an obviously genuine chuckle, he gave the losing team a thumbs up, "Now then, can anyone tell me who the MVP was? How about you, young Ida? Care to share your thoughts on the match?"

Just a little bit earlier...

"I ~really~ wish we could have fought Todoroki!"

Picking up another sheet of manufactured metal, Toru Hagakure slid it into position atop the others, "Well, Tokoyami's kinda cute. But Ryuko's scary!" her bare feet, invisible even to herself, stepped over the dummy hostages, "I don't think she even knows how to smile!"

"I'll admit... Matoi is stern."

She disliked speaking ill of other people.

Yet Momo reluctantly found herself in agreement with Toru, "But perhaps she simply has a hard time opening up," she'd known Matoi for barely a day. Less than that if one considered orientation. But she couldn't recall Matoi socializing. As a matter of fact, Uraraka's attempts at exchanging phone numbers hadn't gone well. But she had friends at UA, Asui and that girl from the general education course. She'd seen them eat lunch together. And Matoi had definitely smiled at something Asui said.

"I suppose we can try talking to her after class," manifesting another tungsten sheet, Momo stacked it atop the others, "Maybe invite her -"

"Oof!"

Clang!

"Whoops, sorry!"

As the piece of tungsten barricade slipped from Toru's hands, Momo closed her eyes and mentally went over their strategy. The stairwells were blocked. As were the windows in this room, the room across the hall and the window near the eastern stairwell. And she'd just finished barricading the door. Yet she was nervous. Training under the supervision of private tutors was one thing, but genuine combat against her classmates? Momo ignored the butterflies in her stomach and focused on something useful.

Matoi and Tokoyami.

The former posed an immediate threat, but the latter's Quirk gave her pause. She'd only caught a glimpse of his Quirk during the assessment test. There was far too much she didn't know. Could he use it to fly? Was it strong enough to grab anything heavier than balls? It was fast, but how fast? Since it was technically nothing more than a shadow, did that suggest it could slip beneath doors and through cracks? Maybe she should have gone with something more airtight than metal plates and barricades. Perhaps spackle and plaster could have worked to seal up -

"LOOK ALIVE, KIDS! SHOW US YOU'RE THE EMBODIMENT OF GOOD! OR EVIL! LET'S GO!"

The number one hero's voice came through the receiver in their ears loud and clear.

But especially loud.

Looking at the digital watch counting down from fifteen minutes on her wrist, Momo took a deep breath, held it and exhaled, "Are you ready, Hagakure?"

"~Almost~ Just... don't look, okay?"

She wasn't planning on looking.

It was the furthest thing from her mind.

"I... don't think there's anything to look at," Momo muttered to herself, eyes drifting the other way, hand covering her face on the off chance she saw *something* .

"All done!"

A pair of gloves and sneakers were tucked away in the corner of the room near the crash test dummies functioning as their hostages, "And don't worry! I remember the plan perfectly!"

"Good," she could hear her heartbeat. The tension was enough for sweat to trickle down her face. Adrenaline flushed through her veins. She had the urge to create something, if only a matryoshka doll or two, to steady her nerves. But through sheer willpower and focusing on the exercise, Momo refrained from doing something she'd quickly regret. Her lipid supply was already dangerously low from creating everything necessary for their plan to succeed, "Wait for my signal! We'll only have one chance at -"

CRASH!

A distant groan, muffled by several floors of concrete and steel rebar.

CRASH!

Another thud followed the first, only closer.

"Darn it - " as a third barricade met an untimely demise, Momo refrained from cursing, " - she's tearing through them like paper!"

"I thought you said they could stop an elephant!" Toru's invisibility didn't prevent her from stammering, out of outrage or nervousness she didn't know.

"They *can*," Momo's attempt at defending her Quirk faltered when another barricade sounded like someone kicked it against a wall, "But I never expected -"

She covered her mouth when the door down the hallway opened, creaking upon rusted hinges.

A bead of sweat dripped from her chin.

As footsteps slowly approached their room, stopping on the other side of the door, Momo swallowed the lump in her throat.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, for whatever reason, the footsteps continued down the hallway.

Momo's knees wobbled when the ominous presence slowly moved away. Mato and Tokoyami were *really* taking the training exercise seriously. But as that thought was overwhelmed by the hastily constructed blockade further down the hallway shattering into countless pieces, followed by a door opening and closing, she belatedly remembered they were supposed to be the villains. And Mato a hero. But that didn't stop her from holding her breath for nearly half a minute after Mato and Tokoyami moved to another floor.

"Ah," holding a hand over her pounding heart, she reached for something to steady her nerves, "That was close."

"Hey," hidden behind a stack of crates despite being completely invisible to the naked eye, Toru cupped her hands around her mouth and whispered, "Do you think they knew -"

She didn't get the chance to finish when part of the ceiling collapsed.

"Aw, my bad."

Riding atop the resulting avalanche of debris, dust curling around her costume and a crimson sword about the same length of her arm stabbed into a chunk of concrete, Ryuko's grin was downright vicious, "Am I interrupting something?"

Back in the Present...

"Me? I... well..."

Taken off-guard by the spotlight suddenly thrust upon him, Ida took a moment to clear his throat, "... well, precluding the result, I would say Yaoyorozu. While it's true her team didn't win, she anticipated Matoi and Tokoyami's strategy and prepared countermeasures. She also efficiently utilized her and Hagakure's Quirks. If it weren't for Matoi's willingness to behave like a villain, she likely would have won."

"An excellent deduction!"

All Might granted Ida a nod of approval before clicking the pen in his hand, "It might seem uncharacteristically villainous, but sometimes a hero must act accordingly to throw evildoers off their game!"

Just a little bit earlier...

Ryuko's elation lasted as long as it took her to spot the twenty-millimeter artillery cannon.

"On the contrary," with some measure of satisfaction, Momo braced one hand against the recently materialized weaponry, "You fell right into my trap!"

A quarter of a pound of gunpowder detonated, sending a nitrile net flying across the room.

Ryuko didn't know if she laughed or cursed because crashing through a ceiling only to find herself staring at a cannon wasn't something that happened every freaking day.

Even so, at the same time, she flew into motion, gloves crinkling around clenching fingers and lips drawn into a determined snarl.

And she swung.

Two fervent swings became four, then eight and finally, sixteen. Her arm moved back and forth, slicing through the nitrile webbing before it so much as touched her. And by the time Yaoyorozu realized her surprise attack failed, Ryuko stomped a foot against the ground, smirked and aimed her less-jagged-than-usual sword at the faux villain while tattered webbing rained around them, "Nice try! But looks like your trap failed!"

Another bead of sweat joined the several already trickling down Momo's face.

Matoi was fast.

Which meant it was time to move onto Plan B.

"Who said that was my trap?" her forearm sparkled as lipids broke down and atoms restructured themselves into metal and plastic. It was personally abhorrent, but she was supposed to be a villain. Her grimace turned into a smirk as a fake grenade fell into her fingers, thumb twitching against the pin, "Surrender or everyone die!"

Ryuko's brows furrowed into something vaguely resembling a frown.

"Heh, go ahead," but what emerged was something between a chuckle and snort. Her lips curled into a grin villainous in every way, shape and form. One far outmatching Yaoyorozu's stereotypical bluster reminiscent of a movie villain than a genuine criminal, "If you want to kill yourself, by all means, don't let me stop you. But you're going to be the only one dying today!"

Momo actually gasped, "You wouldn't!"

"Fine - call my bluff. Pull the pin. Let's see who's right. You. Or me," she countered with a malicious smirk.

Click!

"Got her!"

And then everything turned on its head.

As something snapped around her wrist and Toru jumped for joy, Ryuko's mind rebooted. What the hell just happened? Still processing the last few seconds, she looked down at her wrist and noticed a handcuff. A thick handcuff trailing to an even thicker chain wrapped around one of the pillars supporting not only the ceiling, but the entire building. Her confusion turned into embarrassment as she pulled on the handcuff, which refused to budge even an inch.

And then she pulled harder, "Come on! Seriously!?"

"I wouldn't bother, *hero*," posing with her hands on her hips and a smirk so villainous that All Might, halfway across the urban environment, decided to award her extra points, Momo mentally repeated to herself this was only a training exercise. But she still felt incredibly guilty, even if she buried it beneath a smile, "Those handcuffs are solid tungsten. Your Quirk is strong, but unless you're All Might, you're not going to be able to break them."

Momo said more.

A lot more.

But if she was being honest with herself, Ryuko stopped listening around the point Momo's speech devolved into something one of those Saturday morning cartoon villains repeated every episode before they were defeated by the power of friendship or some other stupid bullshit.

"Oh my god, enough monologuing!"

Actually, genuinely, annoyed by Momo's over-the-top villainous bragging, especially after Hagakure joined in, Ryuko flexed her knees, shifted her center of balance, breathed through her nose and lurched backwards. For barely long enough to notice, her feet left the ground, dust curling around heeled boots and fluttering skirt. In that scant moment, individualized strands of black and red danced in

front of her eyes. Time slowed to a crawl as Yaoyorozu and Hagakure realized her strategy. But they were too late to stop her. Because the moment she landed, she stomped her foot against the slackened tungsten chain, swung her arm as far as possible in the other direction and sliced through the supposedly unbreakable metal as easily as pretty much anything else.

"Oops!"

Ryuko smirked, a piece of chain dangling from the handcuff still attached to her wrist, "Guess I foiled your backup plan's backup."

Toru, despite wearing absolutely nothing, blushed, "That's totally not fair!"

"Like I care what some hostage-taking villains has to say," despite the noticeable weight on her arm, Ryuko kept her sword pointed at Yaoyorozu for one simple reason - she had zero idea where Hagakure was standing, "The only thing I care about is how badly I'm gonna need to kick your sorry asses! Too bad that's never gonna happen!"

"THE HERO TEAM... WINS!"

It took Momo a moment to realize All Might had spoken.

"... what?"

They... lost? But how? Sure, Matoi was putting up more of a fight than expected, but she still had a few tricks up her sleeves. Momo looked at her watch, which showed seven minutes and a handful of seconds remaining. They had plenty of time. So why did they lose? Biting her lip, she turned around, the breath leaving her lungs at the hostages no longer tied to a pillar. Impossible! Matoi hadn't gotten anywhere near the hostages!

"Aw, man!"

But upon Hagakure spotting Tokoyami standing inside the designated zone out on the street, Dark Shadow gently setting down the hostages, the truth slapped her across the face.

"How could I have fallen for such an obvious trick?" Momo collapsed, despondent not over losing, but how they'd lost, "And after I worked so hard coming up with a good plan."

"Hey."

While Yaoyorozu slowly sunk into spiraling depression over being outplayed by someone who'd improvised almost every step of the way, Ryuko shook her wrist, mouth twitching as the thick chains jangled. The handcuff was definitely real. And heavy. And her wrist was starting to chaff, "Not to ruin your moment, but you mind getting rid of this thing?"

"I wish I could, Matoi," Momo sighed, "But I was so worked up acting like a villain I forgot to imagine a key."

The handcuff and tattered chain suddenly felt several times heavier.

"... you're kidding me."

Back in the Present...

"However - "

If there was one thing All Might knew Ryuko appreciated, it was honesty. It wasn't always pretty. Or nice. But she preferred the cold, hard truth over lies, " - while unnerving villains through intimidation can be useful, especially when buying time for your partners to get into position, a pro hero must keep an open mind before attempting to bluff hardened thugs or criminals."

"Sir, I thought Matoi and Tokoyami's strategy was well thought-out," Momo raised her arm, "It was a standard distract-and-rescue operation. What could they have done differently?"

"An excellent question! Indeed, every day, heroes utilize distractions and subterfuge to maintain the upper hand over evildoers," the symbol of peace's smirk widened imperceptibly as he clicked the pen and looked not at Yaoyorozu, but her fellow students, "But there is a time and place for everything," there was nothing technically wrong with Ryuko's strategic villainy. It was an excellent plan. In fact, if memory served, Endeavor utilized a bluff of a similar nature last year, "A hero should always work to assure civilians they're safe. Civilians aren't like us. They don't wake up in the morning expecting to be thrown into dangerous situations. They don't always know what your Quirks are. Ryuko might have been fast enough to save the hostages, but how would the hostages know that?"

He wrote something down.

A relatively minor deduction on their score, "All it would take was for one of the hostages to scream for someone to get seriously injured. Or worse. Remember that."

Tokoyami sighed, "Understandable."

Ryuko refrained from rolling her eyes, "Yeah, I guess I might've overplayed things."

"Great!"

With his limit approaching and only two matches finished, All Might jotted something down, "Onto the next match! Our heroes will be Team I and the villains will be Team F!"

Interlude 1

"Did you see this *joke* ?"

A haggard chuckle, almost bordering on a snarl.

"It says he's a teacher now," crusty skin sagged between outstretched fingers as weary eyes glared at the newspaper on the counter, an image of All Might - smiling as though nothing was wrong - distorting beneath condensation, "Hey, what do you think will happen when the *mighty* symbol of peace is finally *killed* by the villains?"

The bartender said nothing.

Neither did his special 'friend' sitting on the floor.

But *they* weren't the ones he was talking to.

"I'm sure the newspapers would *love* to print All Might's obituary," a finger tapped against the counter as the woman sitting in the corner of the bar, wearing something so atrociously pink she'd stand out in a crowd if he hadn't seen her - time and time again - demonstrate otherwise, paid attention, "I can see it now - everybody crying for the great hero. Weeping over his legacy. I can *hardly* wait."

"~Gosh~"

Her voice possessed a certain saccharine, joyful and disarming while distinctively and noticeably malevolent. The pink and purples and whites of her outfit, less a costume than fashion statement, appeared duller than normal thanks to the bar's underequipped lighting. Blonde hair framed a smirk curling just a bit more to the left than the right, ineffectively drawing one's attention from the reddish-purple shearing scissors spinning around a perfectly manicured finger, "Can't argue with that logic, but aren't you moving a ~little~ too quickly?"

"Quickly?"

The word tasted like poison.

"Coming from *you* ?"

He scratched his neck, nails digging into dry skin, "What a load of bullshit. I seem to recall you wanting to meet someone. A certain student at All Might's school."

Kurogiri's expression gave it away.

But he didn't care in the slightest whether she was upset or not.

"You were so eager to meet her yesterday," a pair of scissors pressed themselves the back of his neck, "I wonder what changed."

"Oh, nothing's ~changed~."

Seated in the corner, smiling in a way that implied absolutely nothing was wrong, the woman's inflection deepened, "But you're right. I ~do~ want to meet her. Of course, her friends probably won't like that. That's not a problem for you, is it?"

His skin itched.

"As long as you don't get in my way, you can kill as many children as you want," a hint of menace clung to his voice, insanity cultured through years of lurking in the darkness, "I want to see All Might's soul *break* before I end his miserable life."

Chapter 12

As the landscape zoomed by, trees and cars and buildings merging into a weird shade of greenish-grey. Ryuko yawned.

If there was one word to describe the last few days, it would be 'uneventful.'

A typical class representative election.

A normal lunch followed by a mad rush to safety when the press somehow got through security.

Ida cosplaying as the dude on the emergency exit sign.

Mako following her home because her parents were working late and she didn't want to sit in the darkness all by herself.

Which led to sitting on a fancy charter bus, half-asleep and wearing her PE clothes because UA shipped her costume back to Revocs for repairs and modifications. Not that she cared in the slightest. Revocs could take as much time as they wanted. Because, truth be told, she'd been fine with only one sleeve. It made using her Quirk easier. And it didn't feel like she was being strangled by fabric. But *no*, UA had standards. And no matter how much she complained, All Might had confiscated her costume as soon she changed back into her normal uniform.

"Hey, uh, Matoi - "

Without turning from the scenery blurring past the window, Ryuko grumbled, "... it's just Ryuko."

"Err, right, Ryuko," Izuku cleared his throat while seemingly finding something interesting on the floor in front of him, "You don't have to answer if you don't want to. I mean, I know it's not something you want to talk about, but your dad..." he almost stopped, hands

gripping his knees and a sour taste in his mouth, "... did he know All Might?"

The bus actually got quieter.

Even the little pervert in the back stopped ogling Yaoyorozu.

"Yup," the succinct response clung to her tongue while a snort stopped itself halfway up her throat. As if their opinions mattered. If someone didn't want to take the time to actually get to know her, that was their problem. Not hers. If they *did*, they'd know she wasn't someone who lost her temper at the drop of a hat. Personally, she was insulted at least half of the class believed her temper matched the blond punk's, "He knew a lot of pros," a massive understatement, if anything, "There's the Wild, Wild Pussycats, Nighteye, that guy wearing jeans and, oh, Endeavor. Give me a name and dad probably met them."

"That makes sense," next to her, Ida muttered with affirmation, "Professor Mato's expertise would've been in high demand across -"

"Forget that!" butting into the conversation, Kirishima asked something far more important, "You know Endeavor?"

"Now hold on, I wasn't finished -"

"I heard Endeavor's nicer in person," this time, Hagakure interrupted Ida, "That his 'rough and tough' personality is all an act."

Sequestered in the furthest corner of the bus next to Mezo Shoji, interested in nothing except whatever Aizawa had planned for the day's lesson, Todoroki was torn out of his thoughts by a sequence of words that not only shouldn't exist in nature, but were completely abhorrent, in and of themselves. None of this reached his eyes, however. The slightest twitching of his mouth. A minor grimace. And his fingers, if only brief enough to suggest to he wasn't amused, clenched before relaxing.

"Tch, that's a load of bull."

Unaware of Endeavor's son's opinion yet nevertheless in agreement, perhaps not to the same extent but in spirit, Ryuko rolled her eyes, "The guy's as friendly as a porcupine!"

She left it at that.

There was nothing more to say.

Endeavor was a hero.

And an asshole with an ego the size of Mount Fuji.

"Don't leave us hanging!" curious in a way only someone invisible could be, Hagakure leaned over her seat, ignoring Mineta's protest when she 'accidentally' smacked him in the side of his head with her elbow, "When did you meet him? Was Todoroki there?"

Everybody was staring at her.

Perfect.

"... I met him once."

It was actually more than once.

"... and no, he wasn't there."

That was a lie.

What happened during those two hours of awkward torture her dad had called 'a pleasant dinner' was a secret she and Todoroki would take to their graves.

"Ugh, long story short - " she ran a hand through her hair, annoyed simply by the prospect of remembering, " - dad was called to his agency. Don't know why, don't care why."

It hadn't been the most embarrassing visit.

But it was the most memorable, "I didn't want to go, but dad thought it would be great to see how Endeavor worked," a click of her teeth. Boredom. Five hours of boredom starting from the moment they walked underneath the flaming 'E' above Endeavor's door, "Of course, it was all hush-hush and secret, so while they chatted, I hung out with the guy's interns and sidekicks. Ugh, it was the freaking worst," another grumble, "Well, five hours later, dad walks out of Endeavor's office, talking about something or another. Then the guy decides to ask dad if I wanted a letter of recommendation to UA."

"Your daughter has a powerful Quirk. She could do a lot of good if properly trained. It wouldn't be any trouble writing a letter of recommendation to UA..."

"I told the prick to shove off," a chuckle, "Got grounded a whole week. But totally worth it."

"Wha - Wait! What!?"

Caught between Ryuko's uncaring attitude and everything she'd just heard about Endeavor and UA, Uraraka experienced a momentary loss of sanity. Something *snapped*. She wasn't sure what snapped, just that nothing about anything Ryuko said made sense, "You mean, you could've gotten into UA on a recommendation! But you didn't!? Why? How!? Gafafa!"

Ryuko was fairly certain that last word wasn't actually a word.

"... uh, yeah?" she shrugged, and Uraraka's already wide eyes widened even further.

"BUT YOU COULD HAVE!?"

Now Uraraka was repeating herself.

But Ryuko still couldn't understand the problem, "It's not a big deal. Even if he wrote the damn letter, I'd have thrown it in the trash."

"GAFAFA!"

"Yaoyorozu, if I'm not mistaken, you participated in the recommendation exam, correct?" while the zero-gravity teenager collapsed onto Momo's shoulder, foam drizzling out of her mouth and lips twitching, Ida enquired about something more important given the circumstances, "If it's not too much trouble, I'm curious what the differences were between UA's standard admission process and the recommendation route."

"Hmm... differences?"

Momo pinched her chin, "There was a three-hour written exam with fifty multiple choice questions, five open-ended questions on each major subject and an essay about what we'd do if faced with one of three different villains. An hour later, we had to run through a three-kilometer obstacle course with our Quirks. Hmm... after that, we were interviewed by the faculty, a sixty-minute question and answer round involving our aspirations and goals. It was quite overwhelming. I studied for four months and barely managed to come in third."

"Was the recommendation exam THAT hard!?"

"I knew the recommendation exam was difficult, but not to such an extent," the speed-hero confirmed with reluctant relief that he hadn't needed to go down such a route.

"Hey, Ryu," as the bus hit a pothole, lurching its occupants upwards, Tsuyu accidentally leaned against Midoriya, not that she particularly noticed, "Endeavor must have thought you could really pass if he offered to write you a letter of recommendation."

"Ehh..."

A lazy shrug summarized her reaction, "Cramming for seven days was bad enough. But four months? Ugh! I'd rather die."

Uraraka, who'd barely managed to regain consciousness, fell back into a stunned stupor, "Only a week!?"

He remembered the nightmare cram sessions, day after day sitting at his desk with his face glued to textbooks, skipping everything but eating and sleeping, just to get a barely passing score on the written exam. And Ryuko passed by putting off studying into the last second? Kirishima lurched forward in his seat, eyes glued to Ryuko, "Wait - you're serious? What'd you get?"

"Uhh..." looking to Tsuyu for support only to find nothing but betrayal, Ryuko scratched her neck, "... a ninety-three?"

"GAFAFA!"

"Yup, that's Ryuko, brilliant but lazy," a halfhearted glare pierced the length of the bus, which Tsuyu ignored as she'd always ignored, "By the way, I saw you talking to the other class's teacher yesterday. What was that about?"

"Oh, yeah, I saw that too," Kaminari forced a grin, "Don't tell me you already got into trouble. Sero and me were betting Bakugo would be the first called to the principal's office."

"As if!"

She clicked her teeth, refusing to dignify that question with an answer, "He just offered some advice about my Quirk, is all."

"You have a limited supply of blood, Mato, think creatively!"

"Instead of conjuring something from your imagination, try something easier."

"Your Quirk allows your blood to become sharper than any blade, so don't limit yourself to swords and axes!"

"If you ever need advice on a new technique or move, feel free to ask. My office is always open."

It was actually good advice.

Really good advice.

"That's useful, especially since blood manipulating Quirks aren't exactly common," Midoriya, sensing an opening, leapt headfirst back into the conversation, "However, I'm not certain if his control is as precise as yours," oblivious to his surroundings, he tapped his finger against his cheek while thinking, "He's been a pro hero for thirteen years, but I can't recall ever seeing him manipulate his blood into shapes or objects, let alone weapons. Perhaps his Quirk has limitations that yours doesn't. Durability. Or maybe his blood can't harden as much as yours," his pondering slowly shifted into mumbling too quiet for anyone to pick up, "On the other hand, given the entrance exam, there's obviously a limit to how much blood you can use at any one time. Of course, that limit's open to interpretation..."

"Midoriya sure knows a lot about Vlad King," Tsuyu muttered in confusion and morbid fascination.

As he kept talking and talking and talking until one sentence bled into another, Ryuko's expression devolved from boredom to annoyance to outright irritation.

"Alright, geez, we get the point," that seemed to shut Midoriya up, but she wasn't done with him yet, "Hey, since you know so much about heroes, answer something for me," it was a normal question, yet the moment she finished, Ryuko watched the green haired hero-in-training shiver like a kid caught with their hand in the cookie jar, "Your Quirk's an awful lot like All Might's. Ever think about going to him for advice instead of breaking your arm?"

She must've hit the nail on the head because Midoriya immediately started sweating.

"Well, um, it's funny you mention that..." wracking his mind for an excuse, one Ryuko would find believable yet not too believable, Midoriya laughed, "Because I actually talked to All Might yesterday. And he offered to teach me a few pointers once I got a little stronger."

Bakugo growled into his hand.

Something Jiro ignored by cranking the volume on her phone.

But someone else didn't.

"So, I'm just going to be the one to ask - what's your deal?" through no fault of his own, Kaminari had drawn the short straw, leaving him the sacrificial lamb, "Did Midoriya kick sand in your face or something?"

"None of your business, dumbass!"

Rather than acknowledge the warning, Kaminari snapped his fingers, "You know, with that attitude, you're never going to make friends."

"Shut up before I explode your ass!"

As Bakugo's threat reached the front of the bus, bounced against Aizawa's head and vanished, Mina stretched her arms and pouted, "Seriously, what's your problem with Izuku? He's nice. And cute. Nothing like you."

"Problem?" Midoriya blushed, sweat dripping down his face, "There's no problem! It's just... well... Kacchan is sorta like..."

"Kacchan?"

It was great.

It was perfect.

It was the best thing she'd heard in months.

Repeating the nickname, just to make sure she wasn't dreaming, Ryuko *grinned*, "That's adorable."

"THE HELL IT IS!"

Having reached his breaking point, passed so far beyond that he came back to mild annoyance, and then broke the barrier again, Bakugo leapt out of his seat, "Call me that again and I'll kick your freaking ass, blood bank!"

"Hey, hey, we're here. Stop messing around."

At the front of the bus, silently daring anyone - especially Bakugo - to so much as open their mouths, Aizawa grumbled when none of them bothered risking suspension, much to his relief, "Now, let's go. Single file. No pushing or shoving. The sooner we get off, the quicker you can get to training."

Interlude 2

"The only real heroes I see are Thirteen and Eraser Head."

His voice was exceptionally deep, as if spoken from the depths of an unexplored cave, "Perplexing. According to the schedule we retrieved from UA, All Might should be here as well."

"So, you scumbags used the press as a cover and sneaked onto campus!"

Aizawa's on-point accusation went ignored by the four figures standing behind dozens, if not hundreds, of low-ranked thugs, criminals and common hoodlums.

"Where *is* he?" fingers scratched at rough skin, "And after I went through the trouble of bringing so many friends who are eager to meet him," tired red eyes narrowed as their owner staggered forward to get a better look, "They want All Might, the great symbol of peace. I can't believe he's not here," a murmur. Another scratch. He could see a couple of pros. And students. But the reason he'd spent so much time setting up this party was nowhere to be seen, "Hey, maybe if we kill a few kids he'll come out to play. What do you think?"

"We'd need to go through Eraser Head."

Standing loyally next to Shigaraki without a single errant thought, Kurogiri carefully observed the pro hero throw himself at their gathered forces before giving the equivalent of what could only be called disdainful annoyance when his Warp Gate was deactivated, "He's constantly looking in our direction, ensuring I cannot use my Warp Gates to prevent the students from leaving."

Another scratch, "That's annoying."

The black mist's glowing eyes shifted towards the muscular creature standing beside them, "Perhaps you should consider using the Nomu?"

"Use the Nomu..."

As if responding to a higher authority, said monster's unfocused eyes swiveled around its exposed brain.

Shigaraki scratched at his neck, digging into dry skin with increasing fervor, "... that sounds like such a waste," while thinking about the situation, disappointed and annoyed, he calmly watched Eraser Head make short work of his friends. One after another, their Quirks would deactivate, followed by the pro using hand-to-hand combat and his scarf to violently knock them unconscious, "Nomu was designed to kill All Might, not deal with cannon fodder," twenty-three seconds and Eraser Head's hair settled back down, followed by a pause to catch his breath, then back to business, "How annoying. And here I thought All Might would be standing front and center like a true hero. Not hiding in the shadows."

A grimace.

"That said - let's give All Might another five minutes," something resembling frustration twisted his voice, "If he's still not here, Nomu will just have to start having fun without him."

Her presence was almost unnoticeable. A barely observable sensation on the edges of one's vision. Tapping a pink boot against the ground on the other side of Kurogiri while twirling an umbrella between dainty fingers, pinks and purples twisting into a pastiche of color, she watched Aizawa tear through the cheap rough-and-tumble forces before silently, perhaps gleefully, strolling in the opposite direction.

"Where do you think you're going?"

He'd hoped to save the big surprise for All Might, but this was a good consolation prize until the main boss arrived.

"I don't remember saying you could leave."

The great thing about Nomu was that he didn't need to give orders.

A wonderful friend.

"You're fast," one moment, Nomu was standing next to him, ready to play with Eraser Head if the pro thought he was ready to skip the current level. And the next, it not only grabbed the wretched woman's arm before she knew what happened, but squeezed tightly enough to crush bone into dust, "But I'm afraid Nomu is a little bit faster."

He expected one of several reactions.

Laughter wasn't one of them.

"~Sorry~"

Stuck for the moment, not that she couldn't move if she actually wanted to escape the abomination's vice-like grasp, the woman's laughter was muffled by a porcelain mask completely devoid of features except for a pair of multicolored eyes - black around purple around pink - and resembling, in the vaguest sense, a cartoonish yet unsettling rabbit, "But I have my own business to attend to. Besides -"

It happened so quickly.

One moment, Nomu was crushing her arm with enough force to break even All Might's resolve.

" - this was your idea, remember?" she stood tantalizing close, purposely tempting him with something they both knew he wasn't fast enough to pull off. Separated from his fingers by only a couple of inches, her voice was worse than nails on a chalkboard, "It would be

awfully rude for little old me to give you orders. Unless you don't think you're up to it."

The sarcasm was obvious.

Shigaraki scratched his neck.

He truly *hated* her.

"So, that's who you wanted to meet, huh?"

If she weren't an important 'ally' and too darn fast to catch, he'd have killed her months ago. But if she wanted to belittle him, fine. Two could play at that game, "The so-called great Isshin Matoi's daughter," his baggy eyes drifted away from Eraser Head to the students near the entrance, "Ryuko, was it? I wonder what her Quirk is."

"You don't need to worry about something like that," her voice remained as saccharine as ever yet possessed an underlying menace impossible to ignore, "Just focus on taking down All Might," her back was to Shigaraki, flaunting every moment he'd been unable to touch her, "Because it would be a real shame if we came all this way only for your adorable pet to be a completely disappointment."

And then she was gone.

As if she was never there.

His fingers stopped scratching raw skin.

"I *hate* being told what to do, but a promise is a promise," he felt something almost like excitement as Eraser Head continued making fools of his pawns. Nineteen seconds. Red eyes narrowed. He'd thought his new friends would be enough to overwhelm UA's teachers, but it appeared they lived up to their hype, "Kurogiri, let's split up their party," another shout of pain followed by Eraser Head taking a moment to catch his breath, "And make sure our friend has

lots of time to chat. Oh, and throw in another student to make things interesting."

"As you wish."

The misty darkness enveloping Kurogiri exploded omnidirectionally before abruptly collapsing upon itself.

"Ryuko... Matoi..."

Alone with only Nomu standing between himself and the pros, Shigaraki repeated the name, boredom slouching his shoulders, "I wonder what makes her so special."

Chapter 12

"It's a pleasure to meet you. We are the League of Villains. I know it's impolite, but we decided to invite ourselves into this haven of justice to say hello. And besides, isn't this a fitting place for All Might, the symbol of peace to die? He was supposed to be here today and yet I see no sign of him. There must have been some sort of change in plans we could not have foreseen. Ah, well, in the end, I suppose it doesn't matter. I still have a role to play."

These villains were dumbasses.

It was kind of pathetic, really.

"You live up to your school's reputation, but you should be more careful, children. Otherwise, someone might get hurt."

But feeling sorry didn't stop Ryuko from unleashing her pent-up frustration, anger and tension on the nearest available punching bags.

Especially since the foggy bastard warped her straight to the fire zone.

Where everything was on goddamn *fire* .

"You three! Get out of the way! Right now!"

The first couple of villains never saw her knuckles coming.

Neither did their friends.

In fact, by the time she finished kicking ass, Ryuko realized she'd never used her Quirk.

Which made their 'invade the USJ' plan that much *more* pathetic.

"I'll scatter you across this facility to meet my comrades! And your deaths!"

As the foggy bastard's words echoed inside her head, Ryuko let the tiger-like villain she'd pummeled into unconsciousness fall to the ground.

"You really that stupid?"

The last villain, bald and with bird-like claws, stopped dead in his tracks. She didn't need to turn around to realize the bastard froze. Not from calling him out, although that would've been nice. But from her Quirk activating by the time her arm swung backwards, leaving him staring at an exceptionally sharp blade aimed squarely between his eyes.

"What's your boss planning?"

She grabbed the asshole's shirt, pulled him closer and shifted the angle of her sword relative to his face, "Start talking or I start stabbing! First your shoulder, then your balls."

Instead of answering, the hardened criminal's eyes rolled backwards.

It happened so quickly and without warning that Ryuko blinked twice before picking the much larger villain off the ground and violently shaking him, "God damn it! I wasn't finished!"

"Don't bother, blood bank."

Katsuki Bakugo wasn't angry.

That would mean these thugs were worth his time and energy.

"They're nothing more than small fries."

The two-bit villain who'd thought it was a good idea to ambush him the moment that smoky bastard warped him across the USJ had

seen better days. Burnt, unconscious and all four arms dragging along the street. He had no clue which direction was north. And didn't care. They were inside the USJ, which meant eventually he'd reach the edge of the burning city and find the exit. That blood bank was the first person from his class he stumbled upon was nothing more than coincidence.

"You used your head instead of beating the shit out of somebody?" Ryuko snarked, unnecessary, perhaps, but the blond punk's restrained growl was worth every penny.

"I'm not an idiot," the half-dead, heavily bruised and burnt yet miraculously still breathing villain fell from Bakugo's fingers onto the road, "If a bunch of villains break into school, like hell I'm going to let them run away without answering questions!"

"Geez, chill out, *Kacchan* ."

A metaphorical tempest, followed by a hurricane of curses and death threats, detonated against her back with the force of a nuclear explosion. It was annoying. And boring. But kind of creative. All of which she ignored, "I'm agreeing with ya," her knees popped as she stood up, blood rushing into her head, and clenched her sword a little tighter, "Don't need these morons telling me the obvious to know something ain't exactly right."

It was hot inside the fire zone.

But the intense heat seemed distant compared to the weird chill brushing against her neck, "Like how the hell did they plan on killing All Might when they're so... so... freaking weak?"

"They stole All Might's schedule," ignoring the fact she might have asked possibly the stupidest question in the world, Bakugo addressed the matter clearly and concisely. They were fighting real villains, not some wannabes or actors. Of course, to Ryuko, he sounded exceptionally angry, "They probably thought he'd be easy to ambush," shoulders slouched, hands balled into fists and an

expression of pure annoyance plastered on his face, he forced himself to approach Mato, "But none of these punks holds a candle to All Might."

He stopped.

But before Ryuko could say anything, he grabbed her collar, miniature explosions detonating between his armored fingers, "And if you call me that again, I'm going to beat your ass!"

Anybody else would have apologized to him.

She simply rolled her eyes, slapped Bakugo's hand and walked away.

"That dinosaur-looking bastard with the crazy teeth and brains looked pretty strong," sweat dripped down her arms, legs and every other surface of her body, staining her PE uniform and making her fingers slippery, "I bet that homeless freak with the hands thinks he's strong enough to go toe-to-toe with All Might."

"That warpy-bastard's the real threat. He's their way in and out," Bakugo spat out the side of his mouth, "If I cut off their escape route, they'll be stuck here and have to pay for what they've done!"

"Oh yeah?" now it was *her* turn to scoff, "I know your memory's crap, but we literally tried that!"

"I know what happened!" he snapped back harder, "But if I hit him fast enough, he won't have time to use his Quirk! And you're going to help me!"

"Me?"

"Once we get out of this place, you'll attack the bastard head-on," his frustration settled into an annoyed simmer. At himself for failing to figure it out sooner. At the rest of the class for being too slow. At pretty much everyone and everything, "When he tries warping you

again, I'll surprise-blast him with all the sweat I've built up in this crazy heat."

She blinked.

Then glared at Bakugo like he'd said the stupidest comment imaginable, "Did you seriously call me bait!?"

If Bakugo cared in the slightest about her opinion, he did a damn good job of hiding it, "When we attacked that smoky bastard, I saw something! And so did you! Somewhere beneath that smoke is his actual body! A real target! Something we can hit," his irritation turned into a snarl as he turned aside, staring in the direction he thought the rest of their class might be, "While he's dealing with you, I'll smash his real body with an explosion so powerful he'll never get back up!"

"Oh, is that so?"

The voice whispered in their ears.

Yet when they turned around, nobody was there.

A breeze.

A whisper on the wind.

Ryuko saw her first.

Standing down the street, wreathed in flames and wavering heat, was a young woman around their age. At least, Ryuko *thought* she was. As the villain stepped through the scorching fire and flames without trouble, her eyes drifting towards the costume. A multilayered pink dress with feathered folds ending halfway down her thighs and armored creases alongside a purple corset. Pink boots adorned with hearts and tied by salmon-colored laces disappeared somewhere underneath her dress. Long blonde hair sculpted into twin ponytails almost reaching her waist. A matching umbrella twirled between

manicured fingers. And a white porcelain mask resembling a rabbit complete with weird patterns around its eyes.

"Sorry about eavesdropping."

The villain casually sauntered towards them, each step accompanied by a soft *pitter-patter* audible despite the flames. Even inside the USJ, surrounded by thugs and criminals, there was something *different* about this woman, "But you were talking so loudly, it was hard not to overhear you."

"Who are you?"

Bakugo immediately didn't like the rabbit cosplaying villain, "Since you're hiding behind that shitty mask, I'm guessing *you're* the real boss of this operation, not mister handsy."

"A woman never reveals her secrets," pressing a finger where her mouth would be, the villain stopped her approach, "But since you heroes like names, just call me ~Couturier~."

"Couturier?"

The word clung to Ryuko's tongue like two-day-old food, "That some sort of stupid rabbit?"

"Don't be jealous just because you're uncultured," amusement accompanied the young woman's saccharine tittering as she briefly looked somewhere to her right, "I'm sure you have a great name. Oh, that's right, you students still haven't picked your hero names yet, have you?"

Bakugo didn't let the villain finish before smashing his hands together, fingers curled into claws and teeth bared as several grams of nitroglycerine spontaneously ignited. The resulting explosion engulfed Couturier mid-question, enveloping her and most of the street in a massive blast heard outside the fire rescue zone while accidentally knocking away Matoi. And despite a cold sweat and a

whisper that beating the blonde villain had been a little too easy, he grinned, "Got her!"

"Are you ~sure~ about that?"

A painful breath caught in his throat.

He hadn't seen her move. Hadn't heard *anything* . But standing over his shoulder, finger tapping against her mask and one foot curled against her thigh, Couturier released what could only generously be called a sigh, "Because between you and me, I think you might've missed."

"DIE, YOU CRAZY RABBIT BITCH!"

His attempt at grabbing Couturier's face and hitting her with a point-blank explosion vanished when she hopped backwards.

"Gosh, do you kiss your mother with that mouth?" feigning disappointment, Couturier giggled, "Well, with a weak Quirk like yours, I wouldn't want to kiss you either!"

His mouth convulsed.

"Weak, huh?" he was deadly quiet, so far beyond angry that a certain calmness caused his left eyebrow to twitch. This bitch wasn't Deku, but even if he didn't know how that weakling got a damn Quirk, she was going to die. He was going to kill her. No matter how long it took, he wasn't going to let anyone else have the honor of smashing that smile off her masked face, "Then I guess that makes you even weaker since you're too goddamn afraid to fight me!"

"Hmm..."

Bakugo didn't know *why* the villain's humming sent a shiver racing down his spine, but he prepared himself for whatever her Quirk could do, "You want to fight me?" halfway through her question, she tittered, "Alright - if you insist," he blushed, involuntarily despite

everything, when she reached into her dress and withdrew a purplish-red sword resembling those dressmaking scissors his dad used at work, "Just don't go crying to mommy when I send you home in a body bag!"

She moved as fast as possible.

Hell, she moved faster than possible, if that made sense.

But it was like trying to hit a freaking ghost.

Half-pivoting, half-skidding and stumbling after whiffing, Ryuko seethed, "How the hell is she so goddamn fast!?"

"Quit whining and use your head, blood bank," angry yet levelheaded enough to keep his temper in check, Bakugo snorted, "She hasn't attacked, which means her Quirk is probably similar to four-eyes'. All speed. No power," he kept his voice down, if only to make sure Couturier or whatever her shitty name was didn't overhear them, "If we could stop her from dodging, there'd be nothing stopping me from hitting her point-blank with a blast."

"An interesting plan!"

Standing behind them, purplish-crimson sword pressed against the small of her back, her fingers curled within its grooved handle and flames dancing on her mask, the villain sounded downright amused, "Only one ~small~ problem - you have to trap me first!"

"I don't give two shits how fast you are," Bakugo's glare intensified, "If you're dodging, that means you're fragile!"

"Fragile?"

The porcelain mask conveyed neither emotion nor expression, but that didn't stop Couturier from laughing obnoxiously, "Boy, and here I already thought you were stupid," a perfectly manicured finger playfully wagged back and forth, "Well, if you must know, the only

reason I'm dodging is because I don't want to get your sweaty fingers all over my new dress! Not that a punk like you would understand!"

"You bitch!"

"Eugh," while Bakugo's temper reached critical mass, Ryuko announced her disgust in a different way, "Are all villains this chatty?"

That word, more than anything, earned a new reaction from the villain, "Hmm, I suppose I ~am~ talking too much."

A giggle like broken glass.

An unseen smile.

And then Couturier lurched into motion, immediately making it painfully obvious she wasn't taking their fight seriously. Instead of moving fast enough to be considered teleportation, she merely sprinted at an impressive speed that would have made Ida green with envy. She was fast. She was quick. And she was mocking them. But undeterred, Bakugo, acting upon instinct and the burning desire to smash her face into the pavement over and over and over, thrust his hands forward and released every scrap of sweat built within his bracers.

"DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE!"

Explosion after explosion.

But she was too fast.

"STOP DODGING AND DIE!"

Another volley of explosions.

"Why would I do something as stupid as that?" responding to Bakugo's demand by closing the distance separating their bodies to

mere inches, Couturier delicately traced a finger up his bicep, "Hey, remember what I said about your mom?" his eyes widened, but it was too late. With a titter, she pirouetted on her heel, raised her sword and enthusiastically swung towards the blonde's neck, "I was super ~wrong~! Because it looks like she's going to need more than one body bag!"

CLANG!

She might not be as fast as Couturier.

But she was stronger.

Blocking the attack shouldn't have driven her sneakers into the pavement. But it did. It shouldn't have almost dislocated her shoulder and break a finger or two. Yet it *did* . Desperately gripping solidified blood with one hand while propping her other palm against the same crimson blade for additional support, Ryuko couldn't ignore the minute cracks spreading out from the point of impact. Spider-like hairline fractures glowing with a red light impossible to recognize as anything other than the same color in her hair. Her eyes widened, confusion overwhelming frustration and driving anger to the furthest depths of her mind while an overwhelming and deafening *clang* left her ears ringing.

"Oooh..."

Couturier's laughter pulsed in rhythm with her trembling arms, "Talk about embarrassing! I ~honestly~ didn't think you'd be fast enough to stop me!"

Something inside Ryuko's soul *twisted* .

More blood reinforced her sword, leaving it good as new.

But draining her body.

"Shut..." a grunt escaped her throat. She clenched her teeth, sweat trickling down her face. She tried holding her ground, but the dizziness and the masked villain's physical prowess steadily pushed her arms in the wrong freaking direction. Out of answers and with little, if any, time to think, Ryuko reared her head back, breathed deeply and instinctively smashed her forehead into Couturier's stupid-looking mask, "... UP!"

The damn thing didn't break.

But it bought her time.

Viscous rivers of crimson flowed between her fingers, reinforcing the blade already singing for the blonde psychopath's blood. Her choice of weapon shifted into something compact yet deadly, thinning around the middle while forming an actual handle. Breathing in, then out, blood trickling from her forehead and down her face, Ryuko chewed her cheek, stomped her foot and *swung* for the fences.

"Boy, you sure are fast!"

The blonde villain's expressionless mask betrayed unmistakable exhilaration as she blocked, dodged, parried or otherwise danced around her haphazard yet powerful swings, "Today's just full of surprises!"

Over and over they clashed.

Again and again and again and again.

Dozens of strikes in half that many seconds.

Ryuko threw everything at the psychopath, hoping *something* would break through her annoying defenses.

But nothing worked.

And worse, in the back of her head, something felt familiar.

"Who are you!?" skating on the soles of her sneakers, one final clash brought her face to mask with the unrelenting villain. A trickle of blood dripped over her lips, caressing her chin before splattering against her shaking wrists, "And why the hell do you sound so - "

Her heart *stopped* .

And everything... every little detail... fell into place.

"That's right, ~Ryuko~" the villain's laughter echoed in the darkness as she remembered everything - her dad slumped against the wall, his blood on the ground and a blonde figure escaping through the broken window, "I'm the one who killed your dear old dad!"

"You..."

Her voice trembled.

Her blood burned.

And she *screamed*, "... BITCH!"

"Aw, huffing and puffing isn't enough to kill me," rather than feign surprise at the outburst of pure hatred, Couturier leaned forward, nearly pressing her expressionless mask against their clashing weapons, each struggling to kill the other's owner, "Your Quirk is really fun, but unless you take it up a level, you're never going to make me sweat!"

"That right!?"

He'd been ignored like a pathetic extra.

Yet he'd waited.

And listened.

And at the opportune moment, blasted back into the fight.

"Nice try," yet contrary to Bakugo's intentions, Couturier wasn't ~stupid~ enough to let him grab the back of her head. Dancing around his outstretched fingers while pushing Ryuko away, her smile was dangerously audible, "But I wasn't born - "

SLAM!

Caught between one second and another, floating midair next to a sociopath, Bakugo twisted his wrist mid-launch. Lightning lurched down his arm as the abrupt change in momentum fractured his forearm. It hurt like a goddamn bitch. But bolstered by the sudden explosion twice as powerful as what he'd used against Deku and hearing every word the bitch gloated to Matoi, he spun counterclockwise, teeth bared in a snarl and smashed his *other* hand into the back of Couturier's head before her stupid-as-shit Quirk let her escape like the coward she was.

"You want sweat, huh?"

If it were villainous to take satisfaction from smashing the masked villain's face into asphalt, Bakugo would earn extra credit for smiling malevolently, "Fine! Have some of mine!" and then matriculate for pushing down even harder, ensuring she couldn't move a freaking inch as he pulled the pin in his Grenadier Bracer, "NOW DIE, YOU BITCHY VILLAIN!"

Chapter 13

Her ears rang.

A coppery taste clung to her tongue.

She bounced twice against unyielding asphalt, rolling shoulder over shoulder before slamming against a building.

Something popped out of place.

And then painfully popped back *into* place.

A gasp passed through her lips, followed by several curses. She dragged her fingers through the asphalt, clenching a handful of gravel and loose pavement before smashing her balled fist. It didn't do much. It certainly didn't help her feel any better. But the different source of pain dislodged the fuzziness drowning her thoughts. Suppressing another wince, disheveled bangs of hair stuck to Ryuko's skin as she staggered back onto her feet. And almost immediately her hand drifted to her stomach. That psychopath's kick really hurt. And like that, her eyes widened. Everything came rushing back. Fury swelled inside her heart. Through gnashed teeth and lips bloodied by the open cut on her forehead, Ryuko's head whipped around, bringing her face-to-face with the explosion already cooling to darkening reds and oranges.

"Hey, blood bank!"

One arm gripping the other, costume torn in some places while pristine in others, embarrassed and enraged he'd fractured something with his own Quirk like Deku, Bakugo growled, "You still breathing?"

She ignored that.

Fingernails fervently digging into her palms, she ignored everything except the only important question, "Is she dead?"

"She better be," Bakugo felt the pain in his arm subside, but he knew it was only temporary, "I used every lost drop of freaking sweat," before he'd learned how to use explosions to redirect himself midair, he'd broken his arm falling out of a tree. Deku hadn't been there. But that hadn't stopped the weakling from asking every day for three goddamn weeks if he needed help like an invalid, "If she survived that," he'd sacrificed every last drop of sweat *and* one of his Grenadier Bracers, but if what he heard was true, it was worth it, "We're shit out of luck."

He took another step.

And another.

Then stopped.

"That crap she said... about your dad," glaring at the burning horizon, he stopped next to Ryuko, "... all that true?"

"Yeah," Ryuko snarled, "... no..." she chewed her lip, "I... fuck! I don't know!" confessing how much she didn't know, Ryuko squeezed her hand tight enough for blood to drip between her fingers. A strange taste filled her mouth. She should be happy. She should be angry. She should feel any number of things. But unable to cry, least of all because it was too hot to do so, she buried everything. She swallowed the bitterness and conflicting emotions until nothing but emptiness filled the unfathomable void inside her chest, "... thanks for the help."

Her appreciation was countered by a snort.

"Like I give a shit," still nursing a fractured arm yet refusing any suggestion he needed medical assistance, Bakugo kept walking towards where he thought was the nearest exit out of the zone, "I know how much you wanted to kill that rabbit psychopath, but as

long as she's dead, your dad can rest in peace, right?" she didn't know if he actually asked the question or she imagined he did, but by the time Ryuko recovered enough sense to ask, he was already halfway down the street, "Now, if you're done moping, we still need to take down that warpy-bastard. And find the rest of -"

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

The familiar pitter-patter, an unremarkable pattern in any other context, devoured every breath of warmth.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

And the overwhelming menace and *bloodlust* oozing from the silhouetted figure stabbed Ryuko straight in the heart. She froze, but as fast as her body refused to move, she physically forced herself to turn around, trembling fingers squeezing her sword for comfort. She'd seen Bakugo's explosions take out a building. Even the renewed opportunity to beat answers out of Couturier took an extremely distant second to the disturbing realization that said sociopath *tanked* a goddamn explosion, "I thought you hit her!?"

"I did!" unnerved by someone surviving his most powerful explosion without a scratch, Bakugo snarled, "Damn it! She must have dodged at the last second!"

"Oh, you didn't ~miss~"

The smoke cleared.

"What... the..." bile rose up Ryuko's throat. Couturier's left arm was gone. The villain's arm wasn't just missing, Bakugo's explosion had torn it off the rest of her body, leaving nothing but scraps of ragged flesh dangling from her shoulder. Yet what made everything *worse* was the lack of blood spilling from the nauseating wound, "... fuck!?"

"How the hell is she still alive?" Bakugo sneered, equally disturbed and frustrated.

"That attack sure packed quite a punch. If I were anyone else, I could have actually died," a crack spread along the villain's rabbit mask, growing larger and larger until the upper right portion shattered into as many porcelain shards, "Not very hero-like, if you ask me," sapphire devoid of warmth stared at them, skin crinkled in such a way suggesting Couturier was smiling, "But I suppose that's my fault for letting my guard down."

Another crack spread across the broken porcelain mask.

Another piece fell to the ground.

And yet Couturier's voice never wavered an octave.

Heart pounding her chest and struggling to keep her own voice steady, Ryuko wiped the blood from her chin onto her wrist, "You good to go?"

Bakugo nodded, his good hand clenching into a fist, miniature explosions detonating around his knuckles, "I don't know what messed-up Quirk she has, but she's down an arm! Don't need a degree to know we're going to win!"

The skin around Couturier's shoulder convulsed.

Her bones regenerated first, forming a foundation for muscle and sinew, ending in new skin and perfectly manicured fingernails.

"Do you remember what I told you?" newly regenerated fingers unlatched her broken mask, "A woman ~never~ reveals her secrets," porcelain clattered to the ground, then shattered as a pink boot crushed it, "Attack me all you want, I don't really mind. Because I'll just get right back up again!"

Her cheerfulness was sickening.

And that grin, saccharine yet unnervingly cold and calculating, widened as she picked up her umbrella, undamaged by the massive explosion, "Gotta say, Ryuko, I thought you would be the first to chop off an arm or a leg. Not some nobody with a second-rate Quirk."

"Damn it," five minutes ago he would have been pissed, but after watching the villain regenerate, Bakugo was more than a little apprehensive, "She's been toying with us!"

"I ~sure~ have!"

Once more twirling her umbrella between manicured dainty fingers, Couturier's sing-song voice dripped with arrogance, "So, what's it gonna be, Ryuko?" she giggled at Bakugo while her eyes swiveled towards the teenager caught in the grips of mortification, "Are you going to go down swinging like a true hero? Or are you going to go out like your daddy, a coward until the end?"

Something snapped inside Ryuko.

"WHY'D YOU DO IT!?"

She flew over the ground, intent on doing everything possible to kill the giggling bitch, "WHY'D YOU KILL MY DAD!?"

"Aw, come on, Ryuko, what good will knowing do?"

The villainess didn't so much dodge her attacks as dance in rhythm around them, "It's not like anything ~I~ say will bring him back, right?"

Don't be absurd! You might as well move on with your life and forget all about him!"

"Move on!?"

Ryuko swung so fast her arms blurred.

"MOVE ON!?"

Her blood burned.

Her vision swam.

"YOU WANT ME TO MOVE ON!?"

Fingers gripped blood burning hot enough that it blistered her skin.

"You know, if you want to kill me, you have to ~hit~ me," her ascent, then descent, brushed cheeks unblemished by power and pure hatred against the blood-fueled shockwave all but tearing a path of destruction down the street. Landing on one foot, toes followed by heel, Couturier's lips further crinkled into a malevolent grin at how hard Ryuko was struggling to catch her breath, "But we both know you're much too slow to do something like -"

BOOM!

An explosion engulfed Couturier.

And then another.

And then *another* .

"Your voice is giving me a headache," holding out his good arm, Bakugo cursed profusely when the smoke cleared and the villain emerged unscathed, "I don't know what Ryuko's dad did to piss you off so much," not only was the psychopath fast and strong, she could also regenerate. Terrific, "But if you think I'm just going to stand back

and let you off her, you're as stupid as that fashion disaster of a costume!"

That he referred to Ryuko by her first name instead of a nickname went unnoticed.

The villain's tongue gently clicked against the roof of her mouth, "That's quite the boast, but if I were you, I'd worry more about yourself."

Her tone didn't change, and yet Couturier's threat punctured Bakugo's confidence. Not her words, nor the subtle tightening of her smile without any muscles actually moving, but an eerily loud *crack* followed by his remaining Grenadier Bracer shattering into thousands of shards of metal, one of which she twirled between her lithe fingers. A piece no bigger than his finger. He caught a flicker of movement. A glimmer against the flames. Something stabbed the pavement behind him. His cheek felt cool. And against his better judgment, Bakugo glanced over his shoulder at the familiar piece of metal sticking out of the ground behind him.

As blood trickled down Bakugo's cheek from a cut barely thicker than his fingernail, *fear* eroded his confidence, "How the hell..."

"That's a stupid question," she hadn't been paying attention, yet Couturier twirled around the blood-forged sword, then pirouetted with one leg stretched vertically, kneecap kissing her lips, when Ryuko adjusted herself mid-swing, "Isn't it obvious?" a graceful backflip following the slightest of course corrections took her above the decapitating strike with only a few strands of genuinely blonde hair fluttering around the sharpened blade, "I'm just that far out of your league!"

In the middle of her taunt, the villainess flipped forward and ever-so-gently drove her foot into the back of Ryuko's neck.

"Well, it's been fun," as the ill-tempered hero-in-training struggled keeping her balance, Couturier brushed motes of dust and soot from

her costume, "But I think we're done here."

"The hell do you think you're going?"

Too pissed off to realize she never so much as laid a finger on the villain, Ryuko spun around, swinging at empty space, "We're not finished!"

"Are you really that stupid?" pink boots halted as their owner paused mid-stride, "Hmm, of course, you are," facing away from the two young heroes, blade clasped against the small of her back, Couturier's voice hardened to an unnervingly jagged edge, "I don't know what I expected, but it certainly wasn't this," her smile faded into a petulant pout, "Fighting you simply isn't fun. Well, not like *this*," as quickly as it had vanished, her malevolent smile returned alongside a noticeable tilting of her head, "I wonder if you'd be more fun after I killed your friend. Her name was Tsu... something... right?"

"RRRAAAAAAAGGGGGGHHH!"

Blood exploded into the raging inferno around Ryuko, blossoming into a visceral flower before flowing into the writhing blade between her fingers.

"Oh, gosh, you're ~really~ going to fight until your body's dry, huh," heat brushed against Couturier's face, courtesy of the blistering explosion of raw power.

The hurricane-force winds dislodged her hair from its characteristic twintails.

Her dress fluttered and rippled as Ryuko's sword split down the middle, extending itself to nearly thrice its original length and *snap* back together.

"I *wonder* how much blood you're using, Ryuko. Ten liters? Or maybe fifteen liters," despite the sweltering heat and raging winds,

Couturier punctuated each question with a cheerful giggle. Her sword shimmered in the autumnal light, audibly groaning as her fingers tightened ever-so-slightly around its curved handle, "Or maybe twenty. That's gotta be dangerous."

Ryuko gasped.

Her vision wavered, sounds becoming nothing more than muffled noises and the flames faded against clammy skin.

Barely able to stand, let alone speak, feeling worse than she'd ever felt before, Ryuko nevertheless forced herself to remain conscious.

"Well, I suppose it really doesn't matter," monstrous sapphire eyes narrowed gleefully, "But you better make this count, Ryuko, because if you screw up..." manicured fingers abruptly snapped the oversized scissor sword towards the teenager. And her smile twisted maliciously, unfazed by the hatred directed in her direction, "I'll be forced to take my fun elsewhere!"

Something happened.

An event so miraculous and unbelievable that Ryuko didn't understand until someone explained it to her.

For several seconds, the entire USJ trembled as if slammed by a powerful magnitude nine earthquake, shattering countless windows and knocking over a building rendered unstable by Bakugo's earlier explosion. Artificial flames danced chaotically. The pavement beneath her sneakers trembled, cracks spiderwebbing down the street and over sidewalks. The dome above them creaked and groaned, struggling to maintain itself against the overwhelming force punching its way throughout the USJ. Yet what temporarily drove away the encroaching darkness, leaving her feeling somewhat normal, dizziness and labored breathing forgotten, at least for a miraculous moment, was the blonde psychopath's attention swiveling towards something that wasn't either of them.

A split-second opening no longer than the blink of an eye.

Before the thought crossed her mind, a sweaty hand slapped her back.

Her skin charred.

The back of her PE uniform burnt to ash.

But the explosion propelled her towards Couturier several times faster than she could have moved under her own power. Her stomach lurched. Spittle flew from her lips. Her feathery hair fluttered as she went from zero to one hundred miles per hour in a heartbeat. The acceleration almost knocked her out, giving her newfound appreciation to Bakugo's ability to withstand his own explosions. Yet despite that, Ryuko remained focused. She drove away the darkness by focusing on one thing and one thing only. The only thing that mattered.

Halfway to Couturier, she slammed one sneaker against the street, redirecting her momentum and forcing herself into a front flip.

Another quarter of the way, floating upside-down inches above the asphalt, dirt brushing against her cheeks, she forcibly drew every last drop of blood back into her body.

She'd never pushed her Quirk this far.

Not even during the entrance exam.

Her heart felt like All Might himself was squeezing it.

It *hurt* .

She could barely think.

All she wanted to do was close her eyes.

But she didn't.

Another explosion. It could have been from her fist. Or it could have been from somewhere else in the USJ. Ryuko didn't know. And more importantly, she didn't care. As her knuckles impacted the villain's button nose with the force of a miniature nuclear explosion, she twisted her wrist and *pushed* . Blood splattered. Spittle flew outwards. Her upper body twisting at an awkward angle, Couturier slammed head-first against the ground before momentum catapulted her backwards through a building, shattering glass and disintegrating reinforced concrete in a trajectory that took her halfway across the fire rescue zone, through the retaining steel dome and into the USJ's greater facility.

"GGGGOOOO TTTTOOOO HHHHEEEELLLLLLLL!"

Interlude 3

"Ow..."

A musty smell of liquor and leather. People walking in the streets outside. Horns honking. As the dark fog retreated into Kurogiri, leaving him prone on the floor, blood pooling around his body, every movement, no matter how small or petty, agony, Shigaraki struggled to pick his head up, "... shot in both arms and legs."

Everything hurt.

"Beaten. Failed."

He'd been so close to winning. The final boss's HP had been nearly depleted. The other heroes were too far away to help. Then those annoying kids decided to play hero. One of them pinned Kurogiri to the ground while another froze Nomu long enough for All Might to wiggle free. But that wasn't the worst part. No, the worst part was All Might pummeling Nomu into the stratosphere like it was nothing, "Those kids were so strong."

And then there was *her* reaction.

Despite being unable to move his arms or legs without bursts of excruciating pain, Shigaraki experienced something similar to exhilarating. Or maybe excitement. It felt like a waking dream. Something impossible. But the evidence was there. He could see it with his own eyes. No matter how hard she'd tried distracting him with veiled threats and half-baked vows to kill him, that woman couldn't hide the truth. She'd been beaten. Badly. And not by a pro like All Might, but by some kids. It almost made him thank Ryuko Matoi for providing such wonderful entertainment.

Almost .

"The Symbol of Peace wasn't weakened at all," dry skin wrinkled while a petulant eye widened, "You were wrong, master! So wrong!"

"No, I wasn't."

A voice answered, "We simply weren't as prepared as we should have been."

"I agree," another voice, different from the first, older-sounding, gruff and somewhat arrogant, grumbled from the television at the end of the bar, screen filled with static and 'Audio Only' flickering at the bottom, "We underestimated the heroes. Thankfully, we failed under that cheap League of Villains name and not our own," an indecipherable noise interrupted the man before he resumed talking, seemingly distracted by something, "And what of the creature the master and I created? Where is Nomu?"

"Yes," the first voice asked, "Why is he not with you?"

"My apologies," Kurogiri's glowing eyes wavered in a fashion similar to frowning, "But he was blown away."

"What!?"

"It was All Might's doing," the warping villain's voice betrayed a measure of frustration, "Without coordinates to his precise location, I couldn't use my Warp to bring him with us. We didn't have any time to search for him!"

"This is a travesty," despair clung to the second voice, "And after all we did to make him as powerful as All Might."

If the first voice was disappointed, he did not sound like it, "I suppose it can't be helped, unfortunately."

"Hold on," the lack of video was one-way. A measure of secrecy to prevent any heroes from potentially seeing his face if they managed

to infiltrate Shigaraki's location. Yet the second voice sounded curious, "Where is Nui?"

"I'm not certain."

Unlike with explaining Nomu's absence, Kurogiri wasn't apologetic. He had no reason to be. Not when it came to her, "One minute she was with us, and the next she was gone," dark fog writhed around his buttoned vest and metal collar, "Furthermore, she appeared... agitated. Although she was seemingly uninjured, her costume lay tattered and the mask she had chosen was missing," he waited for his master's instruction, yet when nothing came through the television but deafening silence, continued, "She did not say so herself, but it appears those children may have bested her."

On the floor, Shigaraki laughed.

"She bragged about being so *strong*," a pained chuckle bordering on a snarl, "Yet she couldn't kill a single annoying brat."

"Is that so?" his master sounded amused, "Do you believe Nui was unable to handle this particular student?"

Shigaraki's eyes widened.

"I see... my apologies, it was shortsighted for me to trust Nui to adequately explain herself," the man paused, apparently recollecting his thoughts, "You are undoubtedly familiar with Nui's abilities. That's why you're probably confused. It should have been simple for someone such as her to eliminate a single student. But that was never *my* goal," another moment of deafening silence broken by muffled sounds of traffic from outside the bar, "Miss Matoi's Quirk is rather intriguing. I wished to see it for myself. After all, it would have been foolish to allow petty grievances remove such an interesting ability from the board."

The man stopped, allowing the other individual's voice to come through.

"Nui was instructed to test the limits of Miss Matoi's Quirk," an almost analytical grumble, then an arrogant muttering, "Then retreat. But it appears she's grown too confident in her power. An embarrassing mistake I'm certain she'll dare not repeat."

"Power..." Shigaraki tasted the virulent poison lingering on that word, "... that reminds me. There was a kid there who tried to protect All Might. He was just as fast as him."

The first voice's interest was palpable, "Oh?"

"If he hadn't gotten in our way," fingernails scrapped against the wooden floor, "We might have killed the Symbol of Peace," chapped lips and dried skin twisted into a barely human mockery of hatred, each word blistering reality with childish darkness, "If it weren't for that brat... that brat..."

"Naturally, you're upset, but this was not a futile mission. We've learned many things," his master's voice was reassuring, "Heal your wounds. Gather the villainous elite. Take all the time you need. Think about what happened, what you could have done differently or improved upon," a short, unnoticeable pause, "As for Nui, you needn't worry about her. I'll see she understands what to do next. For the moment, I must remain hidden in the shadows, which is why I need you to be my face. A symbol of your own. Show the world that it should be afraid of you."

Chapter 14

Bakugo was *frustrated* .

He was supposed to be strong.

He *was* strong.

A flash of blonde hair over an indistinct face mocked him.

His fingers clenched around his chin.

That villain had been tough as shit. And a freaking sociopath. She'd killed Ryuko's dad. Then came all the way to UA to finish the job. And worse, she made him look weak. Weak like Deku. He'd thrown everything in his arsenal at her. He'd literally broken his arm blasting her face into the ground. And he helped Ryuko punch her over the horizon. But none of that had been enough. She'd shrugged off their attacks like they were nothing. Because they were nothing. All while mocking him. His snarl steadily deepened alongside the growing sense of unease.

The only reason they were still alive was because of All Might.

And while he stewed in class, Ryuko was talking to the cops.

Because he couldn't remember anything about that bitch except for her stupid blonde hair.

"Hey, man, you alright?"

For some bewildering reason, shitty hair decided to get up, walk across the room and stand next to his desk like they were friends. Which they weren't. But even half-exhausted from that old woman healing his fractured arm, leaving him tired and starving, Bakugo still had enough to angrily ignore him, "The hell do you want?"

"You've been angry since we got back. Well, angrier than usual," unfazed by the blistering waves of annoyance blasting against his soul like heat from an oven, Kirishima pointed over his shoulder, where a third of the class was staring in their direction, "You know, for a guy who beat a villain even the teachers say was dangerous, you don't look happy."

He refused to dignify that, "We didn't beat her."

"Come on, we all saw her go flying," Kirishima remembered *exactly* what happened after All Might haymakered that brain villain, "Even that hand dude was shocked when she crashed landed next to him. Before he started laughing," his eyebrows rose before he shook his head and pumped a fist, "But you and Matoi must've kicked her butt because her boss laughed about it!"

"I said we DIDN'T beat her!"

Clenching his teeth tightly enough that they ground against each other, Bakugo felt himself snap, the weight of failure and weakness overwhelming his admittedly short temper, "We threw everything at her. I slammed her with the biggest, most powerful explosion I could. It tore off her freaking arm. But she shrugged it off like it was nothing," his hands trembled not from anger, but impotence. His Quirk was supposed to be strong. He was supposed to be strong. But that woman treated him like Deku. The same Deku who broke both his legs and arm helping All Might, "Then she grew it back."

Rikido Sato double-took at the mental image, "Wait... seriously?"

"It pisses me the hell off, but we got lucky," his anger cooled into tranquil fury, "She was faster than me. Faster than Ryuko. The only reason we're still breathing is because whatever All Might did, it distracted her long enough for Ryuko to deck her in the freaking face."

"Heeeeeeeey..."

At the front of the room, sitting on a desk not her own, feet kicking back and forth, Mina smiled, a villainous grin, "When did you and Ryuko become so close?"

It was such an out-of-the-blue question that Bakugo, if only for a second, forgot he was angry, "Eh?"

"Oh, you know," the pink skinned teenager laced her fingers together, exposing a mouthful of white teeth.

That didn't answer anything, "The hell are you talking about?"

"Oooooohhh...."

This time, Uraraka *smiled* while bouncing in her seat, "Oh my god, you're right, Mina! He and Ryuko must've become best friends forged in the heat of battle," a fuse was lit with that false assertion. A spark that transformed Bakugo's confusion into bombastic fury. Something worsened by what she asked next, "What do you suppose we should call their team?"

"EH!?"

"Hey, what about 'hot-blooded?'" offering a suggestion heedless of the cost to his life and health, Hanta Sero's smirk was only surpassed by Bakugo's temper, "Since Ryuko's Quirk is all about blood and Bakugo's always about to explode like a volcano."

"SHUT YOUR MOUTH, DUCT TAPE, BEFORE I BLOW IT UP!"

The tape-wielding hero-in-training pointed at said exploding student, "See? It's perfect."

"THE HELL IT IS!"

"Huh," Jiro knew she shouldn't get involved, yet she commented nevertheless, "He's got a point."

"THE HELL HE DOES!"

"Please, let's show each other respect," waving his arm while interjecting himself into the conversation, Ida, if only briefly, earned the closest emotion he could to respect in Bakugo's mind before throwing that away with a comment so absurd it actually threw off reality, "Nekketsu sounds much more professional!"

"I'LL KILL YOU!"

Things quickly devolved into a one-sided shouting match.

Bakugo vowing to kill everyone and at least a quarter of Class 1-A wondering what happened between him and Ryuko.

And after everything that happened, even with two of their classmates in the nurse's office and heroes swarming the campus, things felt relatively normal.

My Bloody Academia

"Let's review what happened one more time."

She resembled a half-assed mummy.

Bandages covered every finger except her left thumb. Another bandage was glued to her left cheek. A thick layer of bandages was wrapped around her forehead and wrists. It didn't hurt. Not anymore. But it itched. And there was nobody to blame but herself. First-degree burns. Second-degree burns. You name it, she had it. And it was all thanks to burning herself with her Quirk. Something she hadn't thought possible until her blood literally *cooked* her body from the inside. Recovery Girl hadn't been happy. Oh, like she needed that old woman to tell her she had high blood pressure. Or that suddenly absorbing twenty liters of blood without giving her body time to acclimate put a lot of strain on her heart. Or that somehow getting angry literally made her blood hotter.

"What's the point?"

Arms folded, one sneaker pressed against the table, Ryuko teetered on the back legs of her chair and doubled her glare, "It ain't like you're gonna do anything productive with it."

As always, the guy ignored her.

"Thirty witnesses were present at the USJ - you, your classmates, All Might and nine members of the faculty. Not including the dozens of criminals arrested," Mirai Sasaki, otherwise known as Sir Nighteye, flicked a finger against his glasses while reviewing collated statements from said witnesses on the laptop next to him, "We're still in the opening stages of the investigation henceforth known as the USJ Incident, but one thing stands out concerning the villain known as Couturier," he observed, noted and ignored Ryuko's reaction to such an auspicious choice of name, "You're the only one who remembers more than cursory details of her appearance. Not even your classmate... a Katsuki Bakugo... can recall her name."

Ryuko snorted, "... so?"

Bright-yellow eyes behind triangular glasses gave off an impression of a stern glare.

She didn't care.

"Your cooperation would be helpful, but since you probably aren't aware of any reason why your memory is surprisingly intact, I suppose it's not worth pushing the envelope," fingers raced across said keyboard while his other hand shuffled handwritten statements, "Particularly since today's incident explains the trouble I've experienced with your father's case."

"Trouble?"

That had to be the nicest way of saying he haven't found shit.

"Over the last one hundred and eighty-seven days, I've interviewed fifty-three witnesses - civilians, pro heroes, high school students, your neighbors and one chatty criminal arrested that same night," behind Nighteye, afternoon steadily surrendered to evening, turning the somber conversation into one fitting for a funeral. Yet his yellowish eyebrows didn't budge above his glasses, "All were dead-ends. Their usefulness limited by lack of knowledge. None remembered a blonde woman in a school uniform with laughter like ground glass."

His finger tapped against the copy of Ryuko's testimony from September.

"It wasn't surprising. Eyewitness testimony is notoriously unreliable and subject to unconscious bias and memory distortions. A mother on her way home from work will subconsciously note the scarred individual across the street, not the friendly girl walking towards her," enunciating each word, Nighteye steeped his fingers, spread them widely and leaned backwards in his seat, "But after today's incident, I went back and carefully reviewed every single interview. That's when I discovered something rather peculiar."

He did not explain how he reread hundreds of pages of notes in the hour or so it took to travel from his office to UA.

"Two witnesses remembered seeing a young woman with light blonde hair with approximately the same height as Isshin's assailant," a short pause between his words, "And that was all they could recall. I hadn't recognized it at the time, but upon further review, something stuck out - their testimonies were equally vague. Why was that? Could they have colluded somehow? They'd never met. Never spoken to one another. And always lived at least twenty kilometers apart. The odds they'd managed to speak and compare notes were less than one in a billion," sunlight reflected off his glasses, highlighting the sternness plaguing his voice, "From that, I've developed a theory - this 'Couturier' either possesses a Quirk allowing her to erase from memory anything capable of discerning her identity or works alongside another villain who does."

Ryuko strummed a bandaged finger against her bicep.

She waited for him to say anything, and when he didn't because they both knew she didn't know *why* she could remember, moved onto something more important.

"That reminds me."

Her sneaker slid off the table, followed by the front two legs of her chair slamming against the floor, "What's the deal with her stupid name?"

The former sidekick's expression - overbearingly stern with a side of authoritative glaring - shifted so subtly she almost missed it.

"Couturier. French," Nighteye's fingers flickered over the keyboard, "Defined as a fashion designer who manufactures and sells clothes specified to one's measurements and personal requirements," his plain white suit stood out in the otherwise fantastical teacher's lounge, "An oddly specific name. One a normal villain wouldn't choose off the cuff. That she picked a French word as her moniker yet spoke fluent Japanese suggests she's either traveled internationally, is an exchange student or is somehow connected with the fashion and support development industry."

His glasses turned opaque.

"Were there any memorable features on her clothing?" he prefaced the question by stamping something. And then stamping it again, "A designer's mark or label, for example."

Ryuko's face scrunched.

She thought about it.

She really did.

But nothing came to mind except the color pink.

Lots and lots of pink.

"An egregious choice of coloring implies a similarly narrow-minded view," filing away the information for future use, Nighteye tapped several keys, opened a file and quickly proceeded to document every word of the ongoing conversation, "An unconventional moniker. A theoretical Quirk capable of altering visual and auditory perception. Regeneration. Connections with organized villainy. Possible relationship with the international support item or fashion industry. This will be useful to my investigation."

Ryuko choked on the grade-a bullshit, "Investigation? From where I'm sittin', I'm the one doing all the work!"

"Indeed."

He did not pretend to have the answers, "Which is a problem," and he refused to paint over the truth with convenient lies, "This Couturier's demeanor during your fight suggests her unhealthy interest in your Quirk borders on obsession," placing both hands on the table, he stood up, shoulders hunched and bright yellow eyes locked with Ryuko's, "The probability she returns is one hundred percent."

Light refracted off his glasses.

"Obsessive-compulsive. Narcissistic. Sociopathic," his hands slowly spread apart, "In other words - she's dangerous. And despite the principal's confidence, I'm not terribly convinced UA's security measures are sufficient to keep someone like her out. In my personal opinion, it would be wise to withdraw from the hero course and move somewhere more secure."

Ryuko snorted, "I'm not going anywhere."

"How childish," the salaryman returned her snort with a derisive scoff, "Isshin wouldn't want you to throw your life away over petty revenge."

Something in Ryuko's chest clenched, "Don't you *dare* go there."

"Then prove yourself capable of controlling your emotions. Or are you telling me those bandages are merely for show?" Nighteye asked without a shred of humor, "Perhaps you plan on petulant stubbornness and determination carrying you to victory like a comic book protagonist," a flicker of acerbic wit as he dropped a silver case approximately the same size as her backpack onto the table, "Very well, since you intend on heading down this foolish path, I suppose there's no other choice."

With a flick of his thumbs, he flipped opened the case.

And Ryuko felt the exact moment her curiosity crashed and burned, "Oh, joy, a pair of gloves."

"They're called the Seki Tekko," a recently clipped fingernail tapped against the table as Ryuko examined something she knew almost nothing about. Because if she were familiar with the cutting-edge technology currently being treated akin to a venomous snake, she would have been more grateful, "Isshin was planning on giving to you for your fifteenth birthday, whether or not you decided on continuing with a career in the private sector or chose to become a hero."

He watched her irritation and frustration immediately give way to depression and guilt.

"Following his untimely passing, they were shipped to my agency, as per his last will and testament," paying attention to Ryuko's change in demeanor, the hero tapped a finger against the case, "The Seki Tekko are designed to minimize your Quirk's most prominent weakness. If you look closely, woven into the reinforced Kevlar fabric around the wrists are twenty-two microscopic needles," he held it in front of his face, "These arteries function as connections between the glove and your circulatory system. To cut to the chase - as long as you're wearing these, you can use your Quirk as much as your like without concerning yourself with exsanguination."

Ryuko stared at the fingerless gloves with newfound respect.

"You're shitting me."

"I'm not," something vaguely resembled humor in Nighteye's excessively dry response. The concept of a joke. Maybe a pun, "If you doubt its functions, please address your complaints to the one who designed them," the stern pro hero waited precisely ten seconds for a response before sliding an instruction manual thicker than an old-fashioned phone book across the table with almost deliberate slowness, "Now, I recommend carefully reading the instructions. It's quite informative, although the middle tends to drag on."

The bandage on her cheek peeled away.

That was a joke, right?

The guy was joking.

But he wasn't smiling.

"Uh..." it was so awkward that Ryuko didn't know she'd accepted something that was probably bullshit until the words passed through her mouth, "... okay?"

She couldn't tell if he was joking.

And she was too unnerved to ask.

My Bloody Academia

Pink and white sneakers stumbled into an exhausted salaryman at the end of his shift.

"Watch where you're - "

The rhinoceros-looking accountant, appeared to have swallowed a lemon before bowing low enough for his horn to touch the floor, "Forgive me, ma'am!"

She held a cup of sweetened black coffee in one shaking hand. In the other, several blueprints and confidential designs. Both hands covered in bandages and white tape. Her buttoned-up, off-pink shirt was noticeably creased with one sleeve rolled to her elbow. Instead of a business skirt, she wore faded jeans, one knee ripped and measuring tape sticking out from the back pocket. Thick glasses sat skewed in front of shoulder-length disheveled blonde hair that hadn't seen a comb in days. Around her neck, bouncing with every step, was a worn ID bearing her face, name and enough security measures to put banks to shame.

Nui Harime

High-Order Tailor

Revocs Corporation

She was the High-Order Tailor of Revocs.

The Grand Couturier.

Through her authority, every support item and article of clothing, costumes included, underwent rigorous quality testing. Nothing was released without her permission.

She had hundreds of managers overseeing ten times that many designers across the world.

That meant she was always *busy* .

"Miss Harime!"

Speaking of her workload, one of the Tokyo branch's managers, a man with eight arms and a name she couldn't remember, hurried

across the floor as soon as she stumbled through security, "We've been trying to reach you all day!"

She almost dropped her coffee.

"Sorry, I overslept," disheveled hair bounced in front of her glasses, "And forgot to charge my phone."

That the manager *wasn't* surprised by one of the most prestigious designer's chaotic lifestyle was evidence that not only was this *not* the first time it happened, but that it happened on such a regular basis to be considered normal, "My apologies, but we received an emergency repair order from UA."

"An emergency... wha?" the bundled collection of blueprints and designs momentarily slipped from her fingers.

She caught them, of course, but not before spilling a little of her super-sweetened coffee onto the floor and her employee's shoes.

"Sorry!" one breathless apology and a promise to foot the bill for new shoes later, Nui recovered most of her bearings, handed off her coffee to the newly annoyed manager, promised to cut back on the caffeine and then, only after doing so, asked something relevant to the discussion, "I'm not saying you're wrong, but I could've sworn we already received an order from UA. What are they doing over there?"

To his credit, the manager recomposed himself rather quickly, "Haven't you seen the news?"

"News?" her glasses slipped further down her nose, "What news?"

"There was an attack. A group of small-time villains," side-eyeing the half-empty cup of coffee hovering dangerously close to spilling once more, the general manager coughed into a hand, "I only found out during my lunch break, but All Might managed to drive them off."

"I... uh... well..." arms sagging under the weight of feigned embarrassment while her disheveled hair looked even more disheveled, Nui looked left, then right, "While I'd ~love~ patching up All Might's costume, we don't have his contract. And David's not the kind of man to hand over something so valuable, even if I asked nicely."

"The order is for a student, not All Might."

She blinked.

"Oh... uh... give me a minute..."

There wasn't any rush to sign the forms, not when it would take at least an hour for the authorization to work its way through Revocs to the proper channels. But she was always one for punctuality, even if she was at least three hours late to work roughly thirty percent of the time. Across the Costume Development Division and through Field Testing she stumbled over her sneakers, the middle manager in lockstep behind her. Eventually, as in five minutes after demanding for a minute, she reached her desk. Not her actual desk. But her personal station, covered in confidential rough drafts for costume and support items worth hundreds of millions of yen on the black market. As well as six or seven coffee-stained mugs.

"The form."

The manager handed over not just one piece of paper, but an entire binder filled with enough legalese that Nui didn't bother reading. After dropping the blueprints and designs onto her desk, she opened a drawer, found a pen that had some ink left in it and signed off on the emergency repair authorization. That should have solved everything. But as soon as she sat down and breathed a weary sigh, all while reaching for her coffee, *more* managers rushed over like ungrateful sharks smelling blood in the water.

"Miss Harime! Detnerat is requesting another meeting with you!"

"The European and American divisions are requesting your input on a matter concerning..."

"Your virtual conference with David Shield has been moved to next Tuesday."

More.

And more.

And more.

"Madam Kiryuin's demanding to know where those designs are!"

She immediately snapped to attention.

"H-Huh?" her sputtering doubled, "Did she say which designs she wanted?"

"I'm afraid not," a manager with a great white shark's head apologized.

"You've got to be kidding me," as her public persona crashed under the pressure, Nui's glasses slid down her nose, "I only slept in a couple of hours! How could everything fall apart!?"

Chapter 15

"DEKU! IDA! LET'S DO OUR BEST IN THE SPORTS FESTIVAL!"

"Uh... Uraraka," nervousness, confusion and what he'd later recognize as hunger suspended Midoriya's burgeoning confidence, "What happened to your face?"

"Seriously, what's up?" equally perplexed, Mina half-heartedly continued cheering alongside Toru, "You're normally, like, the most laid-back girl ever."

"PM - "

Mineta lacked the opportunity to finish his train of thought. And not entirely of his volition. The final letter hovered on the tip of his tongue. And he'd fully intended on saying it. Was it perhaps a little crass given the circumstances? Sure. He'd be the first to admit not everything he said was conversational or socially appropriate. But unlike the rest of his classmates, he refused to mold himself to society's false image. For better or worse, this was who he was. And he had no intention of changing. Yet this time was different. And there was nobody to blame other than himself. For in his haste to address Uraraka's sudden and concerning personality shift, something that was genuinely troubling, he'd significantly underestimated not only Ryuko's hair-trigger temper, but her flexibility and reach.

He never saw the sneaker coming until it planted itself firmly against his cheek.

Such an angle and speed should have been impossible for anyone other than All Might himself.

Not to mention exposing its owner's panties.

Yet, as if he'd desecrated a goddess's shrine in a previous life, Mineta saw *nothing* before Ryuko's kick launched him out of his seat.

"Nice kick, Ryu," Tsuyu noted.

"Tch," tongue clicking against her teeth, Ryuko lowered her foot, mouth twitching at *where* Mineta's eyes had drifted during his last moments of consciousness, "Freaky little pervert."

"EVERYONE!" mentally on fire and physically ready to defeat everyone standing in her way, Uraraka punched the ceiling, "I'M GONNA DO MY BEST!"

"Yeah!"

"Alright!"

"Go for it!"

"I SAID I'M GONNA DO MY BEST!"

"... alright?"

"Sure?"

"Are you feeling okay?"

"What about you, Matoi?" ignoring the twitching Mineta, karmic justice at its finest for his crass behavior, Ida pinched his chin. He'd first noticed something strange during Aizawa's lecture. While most of their class had been excited, or nervous in Midoriya's case, Matoi's reaction toward the news had been relatively subdued. Or perhaps indifferent was a better choice of word, "Aren't you excited about the sports festival?"

One eyebrow quirked, cheek smushed against her knuckles, and significantly less annoyed than she was five seconds earlier, Ryuko yawned, "Nah, not really."

"You don't like sports festivals?" Izuku trailed off, caught between Ryuko's nonchalance and Uraraka's uncharacteristic and bizarre enthusiasm.

"What I 'like' and 'don't like' doesn't matter," accompanied by multiple cracks in her spine and shoulders as she sat up, shifted in her chair and leaned backwards, fingers interwoven through slightly disheveled hair, Ryuko groaned, "I just have zero interest in embarrassing myself in front of millions of strangers."

"Seriously?" Kirishima's suspicion was surpassed only by Jiro's, "You're not gonna compete?"

"You want to be clowns, all the more power to you," she stretched her shoulders, "Just count me out."

"Count you out!?" shocked by her absurd train of thought masquerading as erudite logic, Ida furiously chopped the air, "But it's the only way of becoming a professional hero!"

"Not exactly," Izuku raised a finger, "Sure, doing well at the sports festival is a great way to get noticed, not to mention sponsors and recommendations from pro heroes, but competing isn't a prerequisite towards your license."

"I know that!" another annoyed chop signaled Ida's frustration, "But does Matoi know that!?"

"Well, I would think so," the formerly Quirkless teenager pointed out only for Ida to suddenly choke on something lodged in his throat.

"Are you sure about this, Ryu?" although Ryuko pretended to ignore everything and everyone around them, even feigning sleep to get Ida and Midoriya to leave her alone, Tsuyu was well-versed in her friend's mannerisms, "It's not every day you get an opportunity like this. It might be good to make a name for yourself."

"Still don't care," most of the bandages she'd worn yesterday were gone, leaving Ryuko free to shrug, "I figure I'll drop out as soon as possible, then grab some lunch."

She heard him get up.

"The hell did you just say, Matoi!?"

Ryuko stared at the roiling thunderstorm of adolescent and impotent rage that was Katsuki Bakugo standing inches from her desk, teeth clenched and lips twisted into a snarl befitting a wolf or a rather domesticated dog, before rolling her eyes, "What? Don't tell me your hearing's gone bad."

"I couldn't care less about your personal problems!" Bakugo literally frothed, "But you better give one hundred percent during the sports festival!"

That was a threat.

Everyone knew that was a threat.

But she simply snorted, "Or else *what* ?"

Which pissed him off but made her feel ten times better.

"K-Kacchan..."

"STAY OUT OF THIS, SHITTY DEKU!"

Deku's mouth snapped shut, teeth clacking against one another alongside a noticeable flinch. It was pathetic. And it proved just how much of a coward he was. No matter how many times he wrapped his head around it, Bakugo couldn't understand *why* Deku hid his Quirk for years. Or why he bullshitted him with some goddamn excuse about being given a Quirk by All Might, "She damn well knows what I'm talking about!" pretending to be Quirkless. Pretending to have no power. Acting like he was weak. Mocking him every day by pretending he couldn't defend himself. If the morons

were telling the truth, Deku had supposedly been strong enough to protect All Might.

Something *he*, no matter how hard he'd struggled against that villain, couldn't do.

"Unlike the rest of these low-class idiots, I know how strong you really are."

The peanut gallery complained.

But Bakugo couldn't muster enough energy to give a damn.

"That's why your shitty attitude pisses me off," a snarl ripped through his throat, "The only way I'm going to prove I'm the BEST is by beating you, icy-hot and the rest of the snobbish pricks too rich to do their own shopping," somewhere behind him, Yaoyorozu had the audacity to raise her finger, as if to argue against such slander, before deciding otherwise, which Bakugo didn't notice. Or care, "And I can't do THAT if you're too chickenshit to put effort into anything! So don't even THINK about slacking off at the sports festival! Because if you're not standing across from me during the final match, I'm going to kick your freaking ass, got it!?"

With nothing left to say, Bakugo stormed out of the room, Aoyama and Koda parting out of survival instinct

"Wow," Tsuyu, unfazed by Bakugo's not-so-subtle death threat towards her friend, watched him leave, croaked and bluntly spoke her mind, "That was almost inspiring."

"What's his problem?" on a similar wavelength as her friend, although more irritated than confused about the rant, Ryuko nonchalantly dug a finger into her ear.

"Oh, I dunno..." with a slight hop and cute grunt, Mina jumped onto Ryuko's desk, puffed her cheeks and smiled in a way that, thanks to the benefit of hindsight, would appear quite mischievous and

underhanded, "... maybe it's because he's head over heels in love with you?"

A second passed.

Then another.

And a third.

"... SAY WHAT!?"

"Kidding! Kidding! I'm kidding!" Mina waved her hands back and forth in front of her suddenly nervous face, not only because Ryuko was angrier than expected, but because everyone could feel the explosive fury wafting from the hallway. How that was possible, she didn't know. And she wasn't brave enough to push the envelope and find out, "It was a joke! Please don't kill me!" heart pounding, she took a moment to catch her breath, waiting for Ryuko to calm down, before stealthily leaning just a little bit closer, "But, seriously, Ryuko, you're, like, the strongest girl in class. Why don't you want to get noticed? With an amazing Quirk like yours, everyone's bound to notice you."

"Yeah!" Toru cheered from the sidelines, "You're super strong, Ryuko! And super awesome! Not to mention you totally kicked that villain's - "

"What Hagakure means, Matoi," with an adjustment of his glasses, Ida interrupted before said invisible girl crossed an equally invisible line, "Is that you should be proud of your Quirk and accomplishments."

"It has nothing to do with my Quirk. Or that blonde... *psycho*," the quick substitution went unnoticed as Ryuko stood up, grabbed her stuff and stalked towards the nearest exit, "I just don't need anybody's pity."

And before anyone could stop her, she'd stormed out the door.

Mina's smile faded.

As did Toru's.

"Pity?" Ida muttered the word underneath his breath, as if repeating Mato's answer would grant an epiphany, "What on earth could she mean by that?"

Try as he might, Izuku couldn't help but wonder the same thing.

It was a strange choice of wording, even for Ryuko. And she said it with such conviction that it couldn't be an excuse to get them off her back about the sports festival, which suggested an underlying problem, "Ida, you don't think..."

"Yes," having reached the same conclusion at roughly the same time, Ida nodded, "That's a distinct possibility."

Back in the comfort of reality, Mina's eyes swiveled back and forth during the silent conversation, "Huh? What are you guys being all hush-hush about? If you know something about Ryuko, spill it, already!"

"What? Oh, sorry," Izuku grimaced, "It's just... Ryuko... she might not care about becoming a pro, but that doesn't mean she wants anyone to feel sorry for her."

Thoroughly surprised by the accusation, Mina slid off Ryuko's desk and promptly shuffled towards Izuku, "Oh no! Is it something I said!? I was only trying to cheer her up!"

"Huh? What? No! It's not us," a blush spread across Izuku's face at how close Mina was standing from him. It was only a few inches. Three, to be exact. And she was staring right into his eyes, "U-Uh, y-you're a little too close, M-Mina!" hands raised away from the pink-skinned girl and sweat beading on his cheeks and forehead, he stepped away, eventually getting enough room to remember where he'd left off, "A-Anyway, it's only a theory, but Ryuko probably

believes hero agencies might scout her out of pity. Or because she's Isshin Matoi's daughter. Think about it - the agency that Ryuko chooses will get their name in the papers, leading to increased popularity, not to mention the possibility of more sidekicks."

Completely lost in search of Izuku's point, Mina blinked, "Isn't that a good thing?"

"Yes and no," Momo muttered under her breath, having followed Midoriya's train of thought to its conclusion, "It might be good for Ryuko, but if agencies focus on scouting her, they might forego sending applications to other students."

"There's also the issue of this 'Couturier' villain."

Ida hadn't seen the villain himself, but he'd heard about her history with Ryuko, "After what happened at the USJ, Matoi might be worried she'd come after us. I certainly don't envy her position," it was truly a conundrum. On the one hand, he understood Matoi's position. A villain able to conceal her appearance, plus enhanced strength and speed, not to mention the capacity to regenerate otherwise lethal wounds. No wonder she was determined not to place them in possible danger.

If she and Bakugo could barely hold their own, what chance would he have against her?

"Asui," the youngest Tenya turned to the only person besides Matoi who could answer the question, "Since you've known her the longest, what do you think?"

"Well... that could be the reason," Tsuyu ribbited as Mineta regained some measure of consciousness after Ryuko's well-deserved kick, picking himself off the floor and looking around in genuine bewilderment at his survival, "Or maybe it's because the last time Ryuko and her dad spent any real time together was last year's sports festival."

The silence was deafening.

Mina winced.

Toru blushed, although nobody could see it.

Uraraka's passion smothered underneath a mountain of embarrassment.

"I... uh... see..." as for Ida, immeasurable shame swelled within his heart, "... perhaps our excitement about the sports festival upset her," in hindsight, Matoi's discomfort was blatantly obvious, "We should apologize at once!" smashing a hand against the other and choking back more than a few choice words for himself, he grunted, "That's the only fair thing to -"

"RRRRRRYYYYYUUUUUKKKKOOO!"

CRASH!

Kirishima was the first to leap onto his feet, "What the hell was that?"

"That came from outside," Jiro added.

Electricity crackled around Kaminari, "Another villain attack?"

"Oh crap! Oh crap! Oh crap!" sweat poured down Mineta's face, "I'm too young to die!"

Someone reached the door before the rest of the class.

And another person opened it.

"Uhhh...", Uraraka raised a finger, retracted it, wiggled a little and then raised her finger once more, "... are you... who is... Ryuko... is this... um..."

"Matoi! Who is this... this..." Ida sought to find the right words, yet failed, "... this hooligan!?"

"Oh, hey," on the floor just outside their classroom, caught within the pile of happiness that was Mako Mankanshoku, hair disheveled and expression deflated, Ryuko blew a strand of hair out of her eyes, "What's up?"

Chapter 16

"No."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

Mako's whining reached a peak usually audible only to dogs and those possessing canine-like Quirks, explaining why one of the first-year students from the hero management course covered her floppy ears. Yet scooping another clump of white rice dripping with curry sauce onto the fork, Ryuko shoved everything into her mouth, choosing the small possibility of choking over answering something so stupid, "Because I don't want to."

"Aw, come on!"

"No!"

"You know she's not going to stop," across the table, mashed potatoes balanced delicately upon her fork, Itsuka Kendo's appetite vanished when Mako resumed devouring her lunch.

It sickened her.

Yet she couldn't look away.

"She's right, Ryu," unlike Class B's representative, having witnessed Ryuko's appetite in junior high, Tsuyu kept eating, "There must be someone you have a crush on."

Ryuko glared at her friend like she'd been stabbed in the back.

"I *don't* have a crush on anyone," she didn't know how the stupid game started and how *she'd* gotten roped into answering dumbass questions about hypothetical relationships and boyfriends. It had started with Tsu mentioning Midoriya and Mineta helping her defeat some villains at the USJ before suddenly segueing into relationship advice. And judging by the pink hair and horns perking over some plants across the cafeteria, Ryuko had a pretty good idea who gave Tsu such a stupid idea, "Now drop - "

An unsettling chill caressed her neck.

And it didn't take a rocket scientist to understand *why* .

The corner of her mouth twitched as through the decorative plants behind Kendo and Tsuyu, past Ida and Uraraka at another table and in the middle of a maniacal laugh that wasn't healthy, not by a long shot, was a familiar annoyance, "What's his problem?"

Kendo didn't even need to turn around.

"Oh, I don't know," as confusing as that sounded, it was the truth, "Ever since this morning, Monoma's been worked up about something," she poked and prodded her lunch, scrapping her fork against the tray before giving up, "It started after he copied your Quirk. And yesterday only made things worse. He's determined to prove our class is better than yours."

Ryuko kept chewing.

"You want me to knock some sense into him?"

The class representative from Class 1-B weighed the pros and cons of the request before shaking her head, "Thanks, but I'm pretty sure I can handle him on my own."

"You sure?" Ryuko stabbed her fork at the eavesdropping copycat, who immediately parked his ass back down in a cold sweat, "A good punch to the face ought to - MAKU!"

Quick reflexes and experience allowed Ryuko to save whatever remained of her lunch from the bottomless pit that was Mako Mankanshoku.

"I'm sorry, Ryuko," it felt like she'd kicked a puppy. Or a kitten. Or both. And Mako's watering eyes didn't make things better. It was only the drool leaking from the corners of Mako's mouth that she didn't immediately surrender. And even that was a tough decision, "I'm just super hungry since I forgot to eat breakfast this morning. The fridge was on the fritz since dad forgot to unplug the microwave, so I planned on having some lightly buttered toast, but my alarm didn't go off and..."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it."

It was close.

Another second slower and she would have been forced to listen to Mako's *entire* story, and she simply didn't have the time or energy for that.

"Here," reaching into her pocket, Ryuko pulled out a dark blue plastic card, UA's logo on one side and a holographic picture of the campus on the other, "Just don't spend too - "

A hug.

A hug tight enough to squeeze the air from her lungs.

"Thanks, Ryuko!"

Ryuko didn't know how long the hug lasted. It could have been seconds. Or hours. Time simply stopped. And when it resumed, however long after the fact, Mako was rushing towards the line of students waiting for their first lunch.

"Are you okay, Ryu?"

She heard Tsuyu's question, but it might as well have been screamed from across campus for all the good it did. Disheveled hair frazzled from static electricity, uniform ruffled by the unexpected hug and bewildered, Ryuko blinked, "Yeah...?"

It didn't sound confident.

She didn't sound confident.

But that was not her problem. And she refused to let it *be* her problem, "Soo..." deciding to forget the last ten seconds before her mind collapsed, Ryuko grabbed her fork and violently stabbed her food hard enough to murder anything left alive, "Yaoyorozu wants to form a study group. You interested?"

It was an obvious change of topic.

But anything was better than imaginary crushes.

Including fighting that blonde psycho.

"Ryuko Matoi?"

Her eyes snapped towards the stranger approaching their table. She looked up. She looked down. She frowned. He wasn't from her class. And he wasn't from Kendo's if her confusion wasn't some form of elaborate prank. Indigo hair messier than her own. Dark purple eyes ringed by noticeable bags. A face that looked like death warmed over. She didn't immediately say anything. Instead, she resumed eating. Since she didn't know this punk, he either came from general education with Mako, support or management. Which was fine. Or he wasn't a student, but a villain who snuck through UA's security, stole someone's uniform after killing them and this was a brutally straightforward assassination attempt.

Another forkful of rice shoved its way into her mouth, "What's it to you?"

"I suppose you don't remember me?"

One cheek noticeably expanded from the enormous amount of food, a few grains of curry-soaked rice clinging to her chin, Ryuko chewed slowly and methodically, savoring every last bite. She made *certain* to enjoy her lunch. And one when she was finished did she swallow, fork firmly clenched between her teeth, "Nope."

She expected some sort of reaction.

Not *nothing* .

"During the entrance exam, we were assigned to the same group," her expression must've meant something other than 'I really don't give two shits' wherever he came from, because instead of shutting up, he kept talking, "At the time, I didn't think much of you. You were quiet, kept to yourself and looked annoyed at, well, pretty much everything," it was almost as if the bastard thought they were discussing something perfectly normal. Like the weather or homework, "I thought you'd be easy competition. Just another nobody believing they were good enough for UA," but the more he droned, the deeper his voice drilled into her skull, "But you proved me wrong. By the time I took down one robot, you'd already destroyed enough to earn second place."

It was wearing on her nerves.

"What, you want an autograph?" she half-asked, half-snorted.

"I watched you take down that zero-pointer," instead of answering her question, his exhausted eyes shifted towards Kendo, "And if that wasn't impressive enough, you helped defeat those villains yesterday," just as slowly, they turned back to her, "That's quite the accomplishment. You really are cut out to be a hero."

For a moment, Ryuko wondered if she'd misjudged him.

But the purple-haired bastard, because he definitely was a bastard, decided to answer that question for her, "I, on the other hand, found myself forced onto a different path."

And there it was.

"So, you're pissed at me, huh?" an unfamiliar pressure clamped around her ears. A muffled silence ticking all the wrong boxes. It wasn't uncomfortable. She didn't break into a cold sweat or feel the urge to stab him with her Quirk. But there was something unsettling about his voice, "It ain't my damn fault you failed."

Ryuko *seriously* didn't like the bastard's smile.

"You're right."

And his half-assed insults pissed her off.

"As much as it pains me to admit, I simply didn't make the cut. It's that simple," the background noise - people chattering at their tables, on the way to Lunch Rush and even leaving the cafeteria - faded into an eerie silence, "Unlike you, UA thought I wasn't good enough to be a hero," her class. Kendo's class. Everyone. The moment this guy started talking bullshit about her, everyone within earshot decided *this* was more important, "Which makes the rumors about you dropping out of the sports festival all the more baffling."

The fork shifted from one side of Ryuko's mouth to the other.

Someone was spreading rumors.

And she had a pretty good idea who, "Don't know how that's any of your business."

"I admired your father," uncalloused fingers fell from the nape of his neck, "The great Isshin Matoi. He's one of the reasons I wanted to become a hero," something clung to his voice even as the temperature dropped, a certain compulsion that failed to worm into

her head, "Who would've guessed his daughter would be such a coward."

CRUNCH!

"The *fuck* did you just say!?"

For a heartbeat, Ryuko gave herself the benefit of the doubt and assumed she'd heard nonsense.

Not even Bakugo was stupid enough to sign his own death warrant.

"Relax, I'm not here to pick a fight," but apparently the bastard was determined to not only erase any doubts, but dig his own grave, "That's simply my opinion," all while maintaining an unreadable expression despite the bullshit spewing from his mouth, "Honestly, it's not really important why you've decided to not participate in the sports festival."

She clawed back the urge to strangle him.

"Oh, yeah?" the fork she'd stabbed through the tray *groaned*, "And why's that?"

"Without someone like you hogging the spotlight, there's nothing stopping me from shining," he wasn't smiling, yet every word expressed confidence, "It won't be easy. And I'm not arrogant enough to think I'd win. But as long as I impress the judges, UA might decide to transfer me into the hero program."

He looked at Tsuyu.

"Of course," an unsettling glint shimmered in his eyes, "That begs the question of *who* I'll be replacing. Maybe you. Or one of your friends. It'll be up to UA to decide who gets cut."

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched.

The fork clattered onto the table, grooves where her fingers had squeezed the stainless steel a little too hard.

She was pissed.

No, she was beyond pissed.

"Oh! Hey, Shinso!"

And just like that, the tension deflated like a popped balloon.

"I didn't see you at the usual spot," Mako squeezed around Ryuko, plopped down in her seat and drooled over the 'heaping mountain' of food on her tray, "You want to eat with us?"

"Sorry, already ate," acting bashful for someone who was seconds away from getting their face shoved into the back of their skull, Shinso shrugged, "Maybe tomorrow."

"Aww..."

"What? Hold on!" Ryuko whipped her head towards Mako, then back at Shinso, then back at Mako, "You know this creep, Mako?"

"Sure do!"

Mako attempted to helpfully explain how she knew Shinso and why Ryuko shouldn't kill him. Unfortunately, she was also stuffing her face with meatloaf, potatoes, rice and multiple kinds of vegetables and fruits, "We're in the same homeroom! Plus, he's sorta the one who brainwashed me!"

Yet Ryuko understood enough to crack her knuckles, "Oh, really?"

"Is that what she told you?"

Another sigh, far more exasperated than unnerved given the renewed threat to his health and safety, lingered around Shinso, "Well, didn't expect this. Then again, Mako isn't exactly normal. And

her imagination is something else," that last line was directed more to himself, but it was enough for Ryuko to lower her fist, "Judging from your expression, I'm guessing Mako left out a few details?" her silence was enough for him to grumble, "I used my Quirk and had her follow me to our classroom. Nothing evil or nefarious. She even thanked me."

Ryuko didn't know how to process *any* of what he just said.

And Mako's enthusiastic confirmation of his bullshit excuse only further frustrated her.

"Anyway, consider this my warning, Ryuko Matoi."

What little remained of the crowd quickly parted around Shinso as he walked away, one hand tucked into his pocket, "If you don't bring your best, I'll be the one sitting in your seat."

Ryuko didn't even wait for him to leave.

"Tch," with significantly more force than necessary, she stabbed the freestyle artwork formerly known as a fork through a chunk of meatloaf, "What an asshole."

"Nah, that's just Shinso," still oblivious to the animosity lingering in the air, Mako smiled, "He acts like a dark loner who patrols the streets for crime, but he's really an enormous softy who loves cats!"

"I don't know, Mako, he sure sounded serious," Tsuyu swallowed the nervous lump in her throat, "Aren't you worried, Ryu?"

A scoff.

And the sound of bent metal scraping against aluminum.

"Don't tell me you bought his stupid story," another forkful of food disappeared into Ryuko's mouth.

"He's right," grimly moving around what little remained of her lunch, Kendo sighed. She'd kept silent throughout the conversation, listening but saying nothing, "So many people took the entrance exam. Yet only thirty-six passed, plus the four who came in through recommendation. If UA wanted, they could hire more teachers. Double the size of the program. But they don't, which probably means every day is another test to prove we deserve to be here."

A clump of cooling rice slouched off Ryuko's fork onto her tray, "Seriously?"

Kendo crossed one arm over the other and nodded, "Anyone can apply for a transfer. Whether or not it's successful, on the other hand..." she trailed off, eyes staring out the windows overlooking UA's main campus, "... if UA were to approve his transfer, that would mean they believe someone in the hero course hasn't met their expectations. They'd be transferred out."

Across from Mako, still busy eating the remnants of her secondary lunch, Tsuyu swallowed her nervousness, "I didn't know that."

"The hero business is cutthroat. Everybody wants the chance to prove themselves, even if that means destroying the competition," Kendo's voice lowered to a whisper, "But still, it's hard to imagine knowing our friends could be dropped out of the hero course without a chance to defend themselves."

"That's bull - "

Attempting to stand, Ryuko forgot the chairs were bolted to the floor, slamming her knees directly against the underside of the table, "Son of a... graah..." before another word escaped into the wild, she clamped her lips shut, swallowing the pain and refusing to grant it freedom. She screwed her eyes shut. She mentally screamed everything she desperately wanted to shout at the idiots who came up with such a stupid rule.

Even if that meant All Might.

Especially if that meant All Might.

"That's not *right*," the pain slowly dulled to a numb throbbing, leaving her standing out of her chair, fingers digging into plastic and metal, "There's no way UA can just do that!"

It felt like an entire lemon was lodged in her throat.

Everything tasted sour.

Even her thoughts.

She didn't care about becoming a pro hero.

But someone else's life might crash and burn because she refused to participate in some stupid festival?

Ryuko didn't care when Mako swiped the remaining scraps of her lunch.

She was already walking away.

"Are you okay, Ryu?"

"I'm fine," her sneakers beat a steady path towards the hallway only for Tsuyu's worry to pull her back, "Just need some space to think, is all," she hesitated, unsure of what to say or even how to say it, before taking another step. And then another, "I'll see you back in class, Tsu."

Chapter 17

Sunday - 7:43 AM

Eleven Days until the UA Sports Festival

Knock! Knock!

A single blurry eye slowly opened.

Knock! Knock!

Half-submerged into a pillow, flower-patterned blanket pulled over her forehead, she stared at the digital clock next to her bed, "...uuuuuggghh," rolled over, closed her eyes, pulled her blanket a little higher and grumbled.

The knocking didn't return.

And as her consciousness faded into a grey encompassing mist of blurry colors and sounds, she chocked the knocking up to a strange dream.

Knock! Knock!

Her eyes snapped open.

Knock! Knock!

By the fourth knock, she was ready to kill someone.

In fact, she was so angry and tired that Ryuko found herself unable to come up with ideas on how to beat them senseless. She moved on autopilot, throwing off her blankets, slouching out of bed and shambling towards the door, one hand covering her mouth and the other scratching her back. Wearing nothing but gym shorts and a black t-shirt with a series of bold red Kanji stretching from collar to

hem, hair an atrocious mess and pissed to high heaven, Ryuko opened the door and growled from the depths of her throat at the figure one idiotic word from discovering what the outside of his nose tasted like, " **What!?** "

The sickly-looking man with sunken eyes and pale complexion standing outside her apartment attempted a friendly greeting.

"Good morning, Ry - "

SLAM!

Yagi Toshinori was caught off-guard, but not totally surprised by, when Ryuko slammed her door in his face. Bag of store-bought lemons in one hand and the other still caught in the middle of waving, he stood outside her apartment on an otherwise pleasant spring morning for what felt like hours. It wasn't hours, more like five minutes. And it wasn't bad enough to warrant stepping out of the sun. But the secretary-manager of All Might's temporarily closed agency found the uneven passage of time unimportant in the grand scheme of things when Ryuko returned a couple of minutes later, fully dressed yet hair no less messy.

"You have five seconds," the irascible and exhausted teen stood in the door, each word punctuated by a glint of sunlight against a blood-red dagger clenched between her fingers.

The man known far and wide as the unbreakable symbol of peace and justice gulped.

This wasn't going to end well.

For *him* .

His feet moving before the rest of him, Toshinori attempted to leave the scene of the crime with whatever remained of his health intact as he realized, belatedly, he probably shouldn't have stopped by

Ryuko's apartment so early on a Sunday morning, "Maybe I should come back later..."

With far more strength than her lithe figure would suggest, Ryuko grabbed the emaciated man's bony shoulder.

"Oh, by all means, *come in* ."

It wasn't a request, not when the bastard was already stumbling around looking for an escape, "Make yourself at home," kicking the door shut with the back of her foot, then turning the lock for good measure, Ryuko pressed her back against the thin panels of wood, blood disappearing as she begrudgingly deactivated her Quirk, "Anything for the *great* All Might."

SPLURT!

Blood gushed from Toshinori's mouth, "W-What!? Don't be ridiculous!"

"Are you calling me an idiot?" phrasing it less as a question and more as a statement, Ryuko glared at the disguised - well, it was a damn good disguise - symbol of peace.

Heart pounding, the sickly hero searched for an excuse, "No! It's just... do I seriously look like him?" his rhetorical question was answered by a hardened glare, "Shit, no point beating around the bush," letting out an exhausted grumble too deep for someone of his size, lanky fingers rubbed the back of his neck, "So, what gave it away?"

"What *didn't* give it away?"

In one swift motion, Ryuko not only snatched the bag of lemons from the skeletal hero's hand before another pathetic excuse stained her floor but rolled her eyes and scoffed. Bribe or not, she wasn't passing up her favorite fruit, "For starters, you look like him, including

those stupid hair antenna, even if you look like something a cat dragged in."

Another cough.

"You were never in the same place at the same time," more blood from the emaciated man's mouth as she collapsed onto her couch, "Plus, you kinda have the same voice," thrusting the metaphorical knife a little deeper into All Might's back, she ripped open the bag, grabbed a lemon and promptly bit into it, "Oh, and dad might've mentioned it once or twice."

"Okay! Okay! I get it."

Toshinori desperately threw his hand upwards before Ryuko could finish what All for One started.

"I should've known you'd figure out my identity. I wasn't exactly subtle," despite his lanky frame, Toshinori wasn't weak, "Is shin always did like to talk," Tired? Sure, anyone incapable of eating more than an ounce or two would be exhausted, "Still, you knowing my identity makes things easier," grabbing the chair from Ryuko's kitchen-slash-dining room, he dragged it towards the couch and sat down, "I was planning on setting up a meeting between you and 'All Might'," he gave air quotes, "Tomorrow after school, but this saves time," his sunken features hardened, "So let's get straight to the point - there's been something of a development in your father's case."

Ryuko angrily wiped the juice dribbling from her mouth, "Unless you caught that psycho, I ain't interested."

"You have every right to be angry, especially since Couturier slipped right through our fingers," the difference between what society thought of the number one hero and his genuine personality were as different as night from day. Extroverted versus introverted. Flamboyant versus reserved, "Couturier... such a freaky name," boney fingers reached towards one of the lemons Ryuko dropped

onto the floor, "She's covered her tracks pretty damn well. It takes a lot to irritate Sir, not that he's returned my calls or emails."

Sunlight fluttered through the half-open curtains in front of the window.

"We arrested more than eighty villains, all hired by the League of Villains within twenty-four hours of their attack," sunken eyes, blue shadowed in darkness, ignored Ryuko's withering gaze, "Most of them aren't talking. Or they're demanding lawyers. Standard stuff. The system will eventually sort them out."

Ryuko was about to take another bite before something All Might said caught her attention, "... most?"

"It's being kept under wraps, but over the last forty-eight hours, at least a dozen of the villains who attacked the USJ were found dead in their cells," the emaciated hero stared at the greenish-yellow lemon between his fingers, "It'll hit the news later this week. A mass break-out prevented by the police and heroes, albeit with casualties," the silence from Ryuko's anger faded, leaving an oppressive atmosphere marked by confusion, "At first glance, there weren't any connections between the murders. No pattern between their Quirks. Nothing in their records to suggest retaliation. Until this morning."

He pulled out his phone, opened an app and slid it across the table.

Ryuko's heart skipped a beat.

It was the bald asshole from the USJ who nearly pissed himself.

"Sir found the pattern," Toshinori watched Ryuko flip through the dozen mug shots, each new picture causing her eyes to widen a little further, "Every villain killed was someone you personally defeated at the USJ."

Ryuko almost choked, "The hell!?"

"I'll spare you the details," what felt like silence pressed against their ears. A deafening absence of noise that drew Toshinori's attention towards the cat-themed clock above Ryuko's cough, "But if I had to guess..." the hero paused, lost in thought over a case that had taken too much time and energy, "... I'd say a certain someone's tidying up loose ends."

Something deep inside Ryuko's soul clenched, "Couturier."

Her emaciated guest nodded.

"Whoever she is, her Quirk's not registered in the database. And our international allies haven't found anything," something drew his attention. Information he'd forgotten. Or rather, intended on telling Ryuko at the meeting he now needed to cancel, "There *was* a villain with a similar theme active in Italy. Scissors. Dress and mask. Sadistic streak a mile long. Name was... Tessitrice... or something," Toshinori's sunken eyes stared at the crumpled piece of paper with said villain's name on it before sticking it back into his pocket, "But she was caught last year. Plus, she had brown hair and green eyes with a noticeable scar on her right cheek."

He gave a rough approximation of said injury.

Ryuko didn't find that helpful.

Time slowed to a crawl.

The cat-themed clock on the wall ticked away the seconds.

"So," Toshinori coughed, "Word on the grape vine is you're thinking about dropping out of the sports festival."

"Don't change the subject!"

"Ugh, should've left when I had the chance," the number one hero grumbled through decimated lungs, "The truth is... when Couturier landed in front of that decaying villain, I thought she was just another

nameless thug. Nobody important. I didn't piece together the connection until her boss mentioned *you*," a wet cough forced more blood onto his knuckles, "But by that point, they'd already retreated. I might have pushed myself taking down that Nomu, but I still had more than enough fight left to bring Couturier to justice. If I'd only realized it a few seconds sooner."

He looked around Ryuko's relatively spartan apartment, devoid of most things girls her age worshiped, even that bizarrely popular pop hero band with the crappy music.

"That's the reason I wanted to meet with you in private. To apologize. Isshin was my friend and I let his killer slip right through my fingers," sunken eyes narrowed angrily, "And worse than that, I failed to protect you. My student. If anything had happened..."

"You think I blame you? Because I don't!"

Ryuko wanted to kick All Might. This was the perfect opportunity. But the bastard looked so weak and frail. Like he'd blow away in a gust of wind. Even if this were a disguise and he could buff up in the blink of an eye, he just looked so pathetic she couldn't help but feel sorry for him, "You were protecting everyone. Like an actual hero... for once," she purposely spat the last two words, "But that brain dude must've been scary strong to kick your freaking ass."

"Ha! Ha! Yeah, he kind of was."

She stared at him.

All Might coughed, "So, about the sports festival..."

"Oh my god!" Ryuko collapsed against her couch, fingers twitching from the irresistible urge to punch the disguised hero, "If you're about to say I *have* to enjoy myself, I'm gonna..."

"... I think it's fine if you want to watch from the sidelines."

The seemingly starved hero's acquiescence caught Ryuko off-guard, "... huh?"

"Nobody can force you to participate in the sports festival. Not even Aizawa," Toshinori laughed, only a little blood spurting from his mouth, "Although, if you're set on dropping out as soon as possible, try to make it look authentic. I'm sure you have a few ideas in mind, but with your Quirk, you could fake a major injury without anyone being the wiser!"

"You make it sound like I have a choice."

Something tickled Ryuko's eye, "Either I give it my all or someone gets kicked out of class."

All Might broke into another fit of laughter.

"Stop laughing, god damn it!"

"Sorry, it's just..." wracking coughs stopped the emaciated hero's laughter, "... I've never heard of anyone getting expelled from the hero course like that! It's hilarious!"

If the bastard wasn't already one foot in the grave, Ryuko would've decked him, "Start talkin' sense!"

"UA's strict, not sadistic," sunken eyes set into a frown, Toshinori stroked his chin, "Unless a student personally requests being transferred out of the hero program or breaks enough rules to warrant suspension or expulsion, UA can't remove them. It's no different from a normal high school. Whoever told you this 'transfer' nonsense was lying. Or psyching you out before the sports festival. Either way, everybody in your class is fine. So, no pressure!"

"So..." hesitation lingering on her tongue, Ryuko sat a little straighter, "... you're *not* gonna try and convince me?"

"Ha! Ha! As if I could convince you to do anything! You're as stubborn as Isshin was," Toshinori half-coughed, half-laughed, "You *are* required to participate in the opening ceremony. Maybe give a speech. But that's it. Whether you keep going is up to you," he scratched behind his ear, frowned and shrugged, "Obviously, getting eliminated early won't lead to many offers. But we both know you couldn't care less about that. Not to mention you're Isshin Matoi's daughter! No agency in their right mind is going to pass up the chance to recruit you!"

Ryuko snorted, "Tch! They can kiss my ass!"

Despite her better judgment, she felt less angry. Less frustrated. And that made her more suspicious, "This ain't some reverse psychology bullshit, is it?"

"If only," with a scoff of his own, Toshinori leaned backwards, "I was never good at that kind of stuff. Always too straightforward, they said," his blunt confession trailed into a drawling sigh as he rolled up a sleeve and looked at a watch made for a wrist five times thicker, "Well, I better get going," standing up, he began walking towards the door only for something to pop into his consciousness, "Oh, there's something else."

He patted down his suit.

"One of your dad's old colleagues contacted me," unable to find what he was searching for, Toshinori bashfully rubbed his neck, "You got a pen or - "

Ryuko pointed towards her desk.

The symbol of peace and justice hurried over, scribbling a name and number, "He'll be in town in a couple of weeks for a conference. You should think about meeting him. Might be good for you."

"Aikuro Mikisugi?" Ryuko mumbled the weird name under her breath, "Never heard of him. Who is he?"

"There's not much I can tell you. All I know is, Aikuro and Isshin worked together before parting around the same time you were born," standing at the door to her apartment, on the precipice of freedom, Toshinori inhaled. And with a flex, All Might took his place, "Anyway! I best be off! A hero's work is never finished. And now that I'm a teacher, my work's twice as tedious!"

And he was gone.

By the time Ryuko closed her door and locked it, the pompous windbag was already halfway across Musutafu.

Her eyes drifted towards the clock on the wall - 8:07 AM.

"Ugh," the piece of paper fluttered to the floor as she stumbled back to her bedroom, "It's waaaaaay too early for this shit."

Interlude 4

Wednesday - 8:11 PM

Eight Days until the UA Sports Festival

"... despite significant investments into lifestyle support, Detnerat's stocks haven't rebounded from their decision to branch into hero support, undoubtedly due to our market shares and non-compete agreements with the five largest retail chains in the country."

The man, middle-aged and slightly balding, head resembling an eagle's and suit perfectly tailored, pointed towards the holographic charts above the mahogany table, "If we increase our own investments ten percent by the end of the third fiscal quarter, plus a relatively modest discount for our customers, in all likelihood, Detnerat will be forced to cut their losses."

"Make it eight percent."

At the end of the table, maroon eyes narrowed ever-so-slightly, drawing the retail manager's attention, "We can afford the cost. Yotsubashi, however, cannot. Yet he's far too prideful to cut his losses," every man and woman in the room listened intently, "He'll continue to invest in foolish endeavor underneath the assumption more money will be sufficient to force his way into the regional markets, let alone international," a hint of indignation accompanied modest amusement, "Still, I want a detailed analysis of such an investment's effects on our budget by next week. If ten percent works, we'll go with that."

"Of course, Madam Kiryuin."

The chief financial officer genuflected at her magnanimity before sitting back down.

Yet she cared little about such formalities.

"Now, if there's nothing left to discuss," Ragyo Kiryuin swept the room for any further arguments before allowing the holographic charts to flicker out of existence. While every person seated around the table wore nothing but the finest clothing, all produced by Revocs at no expense, she went above and beyond. A suit of the purest white, matching blazer, waistcoat and undershirt. An ensemble unmatched by anyone in the world, "I believe we're done."

The division supervisors were the first to leave.

The chief operating and financial officers, as well as the vice president, left together, discussing something with the four regional managers from the Costume Development Division sent by the High-Order Tailor in lieu of her attendance.

Soon enough, the last member of the board respectfully filed out of the room, leaving her alone with nothing but her thoughts for company.

A reprieve after a meeting that stretched more than an hour after its anticipated ending.

Out of the corner of her eye, a dark-skinned woman materialized from the shadows, darkness dripping off her body like water.

"Yes, Hououmaru?"

Her personal assistant offered an antiquated flip phone, "Madam, you have a call."

No name.

No number.

Nothing to suggest there was someone calling her.

"It's been a while," and yet her lips curled into a predatory grin as she raised the disposable phone to her ear, "I suppose this means something has... oh? Is that right?" the multicolored radiance

illuminating her silver hair dimmed, if only momentarily, as irritation touched her voice, "Yes, my informants said as much, although I found the prospect quite unbelievable."

As the individual on the other end of the line spoke, their location encrypted by both technology and Quirk, Ragyo sauntered towards the double-paned windows overlooking Corusco Ward, Tokyo. Each snap-clack of her heels echoed sharply as she listened, sighing exasperatingly only when it was clear they'd finished talking.

"Why she chose such an évidente moniker is quite baffling."

Smoothing out a crease on her suit, she stared beyond her pale reflection at the skyline, "I suppose she simply couldn't help but introduce herself."

A short pause.

"Hm? Yes, I've already ordered her to clean up her mess, unless that's a problem."

Another pause.

"No, I suppose it's not," a titter caressed Ragyo's heart, pulling her expression into something resembling amusement, "If you were truly concerned, you'd handle the matter yourself."

She plucked a strand of hair off her sleeve.

"I see... that is quite the development," moving the phone to her other ear, she rubbed two fingers together, "Are you certain of this? You've been wrong before."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Threats won't work on me," the slight hardened of her voice gave away nothing, "You, of all people, should know better than that. Or has old age finally caught up to you?"

A long burst of silence.

"I hardly think so," surprise quickly surrendered to normalcy, "Well, at the very least, your understudy accomplished something useful during his excursion."

A minute-long pause.

"If only that were the case," a breathless sigh, "As I've repeatedly explained, designing equipment for such a... unique... Quirk has been anything but easy, even for someone of Nui's talents. She's made some process, but with her workload..." trailing off, Ragyo tapped a manicured finger against the cheap phone, "And exactly whose fault was that? You were the one who encouraged such petulance. It's not my fault his precious little toy's been taken away."

Silence.

"As always, you must have the last word," a wistful, almost melancholic, sigh escaped gently parted lips, "Very well, I'll contact you as soon as it's finished."

Ragyo snapped the phone closed before crushing the useless device into innumerable shards of plastic and metal between her manicured fingers.

Interlude 5

Monday - 5:31 PM

Ten Days until the UA Sports Festival

Ryuko focused on the hand-written scribbles.

Then slowly, methodically and suspiciously raised her eyes towards the run-down building.

"... this can't be the right place."

She wasn't the only one on the street. There were a couple of other people. An old couple out walking. A drunken businessman. A kid who'd been eyeballing her for the last three or four blocks. Other than that, the place was nearly empty. Something strange on a Friday afternoon. Something she probably should have noticed. But she didn't. She couldn't. Brows scrunched together, hair rustling in the spring breeze and goosebumps spreading up her thighs because she hadn't bothered changing out of her uniform, Ryuko lowered the scrawled address, reached for her phone, remembered Mako didn't have a cell phone and grumbled. She'd followed Mako's instructions to the letter. Hell, there was even the tree on the corner that looked like a poodle if she tilted her head in just the right way.

But the building was so worn-down and everything so dark and dreary this couldn't possibly be the right place.

The faded lettering on the old sign matched up with Mako's instructions.

Maybe she was in the right place, after all.

Ryuko didn't know how long she stood on the sidewalk, just that the punks who'd been sneaking up on her quickly retreated when she flashed her Quirk, "I guess this really is the -"

A sudden *emptiness* in her pocket caused her eye to twitch.

"Hey! Ugh! Let me go!"

Her fist already reared back to smash the pickpocket's nose into the back of their head, she grabbed the bastard's shirt, spun around and promptly lost any thoughts of vengeance. It was a kid. A bratty, snot-nosed kid. He couldn't be any older than six. Maybe seven. Brown hair. Brown eyes. Some cheap sandals. And her wallet, keychain and all, in his grubby little fingers like she'd caught him in the cookie jar, "I ain't your toy!" a long moment passed as she processed the juvenile pickpocket's language. And another when her wallet *again* found itself in his dirty fingers.

And once *again*, she took it back.

"I know that stupid skirt! You're from that hero prep school!" the thieving half-pint struggled, kicking air while trying, and failing, to escape, "It ain't heroic picking on innocent kids!"

"Innocent?" Ryuko kept a careful eye on the brat's hand, "That what you call pickpocketing me?"

He stuck his tongue out.

And gave her the finger.

"Alright," she hadn't wanted to do it. Hell, even thinking about it left a bad taste in her mouth, but the snot-nosed brat left her no other choice, "Let's go."

"Go!?"

The thief grunted and cursed, which accomplished absolutely nothing as she dragged him down the sidewalk, "Go where!?"

"Where do you think?" it was phrased as a rhetorical question, but from the pipsqueak's renewed panic, he knew exactly what she meant, which made everything significantly more bearable, "After all,

I'm from that hero prep school, so I gotta arrest thieving punks like you."

"Screw you! I ain't breaking no laws!" unable to pry her fingers off his wrist, her prisoner resorted to grabbing everything within arm's reach - a telephone pole, a stop sign and even a chain link fence. None of which slowed her down more than a second, "Gah! How'd you know I was stealing your wallet, anyway!? My Quirk's foolproof!"

"Quirk, huh?" a semblance of a cocky smirk twisted Ryuko's lips.

That's right," seemingly proud with himself *despite* confessing to another crime, the half-pint tried shoving his foot up her ass only to realize his legs were shorter than her arms, "My Quirk's called Sticky Fingers! Anything I want, I get! No questions!"

She almost stopped.

Almost.

Until / came along," her free hand snapped out, catching the rock her prisoner *hadn't* been holding moments ago, much to his horror, "Right?"

"Yeah, until you came along, you smug, bedheaded bitch," terrified or not, the brat had a mouth on him, "Now let me go! When my big sis comes home, she's gonna show you!"

"I'm sure that sounded real tough in your head," Ryuko kept walking, "I ain't afraid of you. And I ain't afraid of your sis."

"Grr! Why - "

The pipsqueak had something rather vulgar on his mind.

But before he could say what it was, and really piss her off for stealing her wallet, a familiar brown blur violently tackled him out of her grasp.

"Mataro! You blockhead! How many times do I gotta tell you not to use your Quirk on random people you meet on the street!?" rolling head over feet down the sidewalk all the way back to the rundown apartment complex, Mako planted her knee against her little brother's back, grabbed his neck with both hands and pulled, "You got a death wish or something!?"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"This is the fifth time this month!" now she had his right arm between her knees, "What do you have to say for yourself!?"

"Forgive me! Forgive me!"

With an unconvinced huff, Mako reluctantly released her younger brother.

Who proceeded to run away, shaking his fist over his shoulder, "Screw you! I ain't got time for your heroics, dumbass!"

"Dumb, little jerk."

Uncharacteristically irritated for someone who, only a few hours earlier, spent lunch wondering where their principal bought his adorable little shoes, Mako huffed, then immediately smiled, "Sorry you had to see that! I don't know where Mataro got the idea to pickpocket anyone on the street," a branch fell out of her hair, "Anyway, it's a good thing you were his latest victim, otherwise we'd probably be finding his corpse in a back alley sometime next week."

"Err... yeah."

Not exactly shocked yet somewhat thrown out of balance by the last five minutes, Ryuko watched Mako's shitty brother peek around a corner, pull down his eyelid and throw her an insult before disappearing. Out of instinct, she pulled out her wallet and noticed one thousand yen missing, "That goddamn little..." she wanted nothing more than to chase him down and beat his ass, but forcing

herself to calm down, she turned back to Mako, who was petting a small cat on the sidewalk, "So, this really where you live?"

The cat hissed when Mako tried picking it up.

"It's not fancy like those modern apartments, but home is home," strolling through the half-opened rusty gates, weeds poking between cracked concrete and pitted asphalt, Mako's expression was all smiles, "And thanks to UA's stipend, we finally managed to replace our dishwasher *and* get rid of the mutated rat living in the air vents. Of course, that means mom and dad barely had enough left over for this month's rent."

"Wait, wha - "

Mako's hand latched onto her wrist before she could ask what, exactly, that meant.

"Dad was really looking forward to meeting you," Ryuko found herself dragged up a flight of stairs, and then another, "But he's working late tonight, so it's just gonna be you, me and mom. Well, and Mataro, if he comes home before the truant officer tracks him down," underneath a flickering bulb casting yellow light on a black cat lounging on the bannister, one number missing with only a lightened patch of wood in the shape of a six evidence it had existed at all, stood the door to Mako's apartment.

A weathered yet sturdy wooden door installed decades before the majority of the population possessed Quirks.

"I know this was last minute," apparently working up the courage to enter, judging by the concentration in her eyes, Mako whispered, "But I'm really glad you came."

Ryuko awkwardly returned Mako's smile, "No problem."

And then the door was shoved open.

"Mom! I'm home!" kicking off her shoes before tossing her bag on the old couch missing a cushion in front of an antiquated television, Mako grabbed a broom and beat the black cat attempting to sneak through the door, "And I brought Ryuko!"

"Hey, sweetie!"

Sukuyo Mankanshoku was just as friendly and warm as her daughter. Ladle in one hand, spoon in the other, a food-covered apron over a pastel pink and green dress, the Mankanshoku matriarch's welcoming smile radiated all the way from the half-kitchen, "Have you seen your brother?"

"Yeah, he tried pickpocketing Ryuko with his Quirk," drawn by the smell of food, Mako gently nudged Ryuko through the door, "But she caught him in the act."

Ryuko was confused.

"Well, I *did* tell him not to use his Quirk on random strangers, not that he ever listened to me," unfazed by her youngest child's criminal behavior, Sukuyo continued stirring the large pot on the stove, "Anyway, you're just in time, dear. Dinner's almost ready."

Now she was *more* confused.

Mako stared at the pots and pans on the stove, "Gosh, mom! How could you afford all this food?"

"With our rent, of course," Sukuyo laughed, yet Ryuko didn't find anything about that funny, "But it's worth treating your new friend to a decent meal."

Ryuko wasn't hungry.

Not at all.

"You... uh... I could..." she'd never appreciated how well-off her dad had been. Between the conferences, papers, lectures, symposiums

and a dozen other things she couldn't begin to imagine, money hadn't been an issue. She wasn't rich like Yaoyorozu. Or Todoroki. But she'd never worried about paying rent. Or having enough food, "... if you want, I could pay you back for this..."

"Oh, heaven's no!" Sukuyo shook her head while flipping rice and vegetables from one pan to another, "You're our guest, Ryuko! We could never accept your money. Especially from an up-and-coming hero!"

"Don't worry about us, Ryuko," planting her butt in a chair probably scavenged from a thrift store or dumpster, Mako smiled, "We'll be fine! So have as much as you want!"

The next several minutes were a blur of sounds and colors. Ryuko didn't know what happened, just that she found herself sitting at a table with one leg missing and duct tape covering a large crack in the center. When her stomach growled, she looked at the bowl of rice, meat and vegetables Mako's mom had placed in front of her.

It was less than what she'd normally have for dinner.

Hell, it was smaller than UA's lunches.

The longer she looked at the paltry meal, cooked with love and care for *her*, the tighter her stomach clenched. She looked at Mako, who was devouring the food as if it were the last meal on earth, then at Mako's mom, who was the doing the same. And almost reluctantly, a bitter sourness in the back of her mouth, Ryuko forced herself to take a bite.

It was good.

It was really good.

Interlude 6

Thursday - 2:13 PM

Seven Days until the UA Sports Festival

"Hey, Tsu, so we've, like, been wondering," in the hallway between english literature, totally useless since she never planned on visiting America, and math, which gave her a migraine simply imagining all those letters and numbers, less than six minutes to ask the only question on her mind, Mina Ashido leaned sideways, one hand against her mouth and black eyes glaring over her shoulder, "How *exactly* did you and Ryuko become friends?"

"That's kind of a personal question, Mina," ignoring how close Mina was standing, Tsuyu tipped a finger against her chin, "Besides, didn't you already ask Ryu?"

"We *did*," Toru Hagakure whined, empty sleeves demonstrating her exasperation, "But she refused to talk to us!"

"Well, she kinda, sorta, *maybe* told us to mind our own business," several pink fingers unfolded as Mina recounted their earlier attempt at coercing the information, "Then threatened unspeakable crimes if we pressed the issue or asked Uraraka for advice," a memory of Ryuko furiously cracking her knuckles passed through the acid girl's subconsciousness, eliciting a shudder, "Which can only mean one thing," with curiosity overwhelming survival instincts, she grinned a mischievous smirk, "There's something *really* juicy about how you and her became friends!"

"So, c'mon," matching her friend's curiosity, Toru stumbled in front of Tsuyu, "Tell us! *Pretty please* ! We promise we won't tell anybody!"

Tsuyu stared at Toru, or where Toru would be if she could see her, "Well, alright."

My Bloody Academia

Three Years Ago

"Freak!"

Every word hurt a little more than the last. They'd caught her on her way home, chasing her across the park to the playground. Tears welled in her eyes. She tried drowning out their voices, but nothing worked. And as they screamed and jeered, insulting her appearance and Quirk, Tsuyu could barely muster enough confidence to defend herself.

"Look at you! You're a frog!" snot dribbling from his nose and hair like porcupine quills, one of the bullies laughed.

"... r-ribbit..."

"Ha! Did you guys here that?" another bully, beady eyes and hair the same color as grass, sneered, "She even ribbited like a dumb toad!"

"What should we do to her?" the first one argued.

"Where do you think dumb animals belong? In the trash," their leader, wearing a tank top and ragged jeans, grinned, "Now, come on. Grab her before a hero comes snooping - "

A rock smashed into his hand.

"Hayato!?"

"What happened, man?"

"D-Damn it! My hand!" holding his bruised hand, the bully staggered backwards, "Who the hell threw that!?"

"I did!"

Through her tears, Tsuyu saw someone standing on top of the jungle gym. A girl probably no older than herself silhouetted against the setting sun, "Now scram!" wearing a black and white t-shirt with a dragon skull on the front, red shorts and dirty sneakers, plus a bandage on her shin and nose, the mysterious girl growled, "Before I start kicking your butts!"

"You bitch!"

The fourteen-year-old bully flexed, doubling nearly twice in size while his skin gained the consistency of something resembling bark, "I'm going to teach you a lesson you'll never - "

Wham!

A deceptively tiny fist smashed into the bully's nose, knocking him backwards and over a seesaw.

"Anybody else want a piece of me!?"

The strange girl turned towards the remaining five bullies, each at least one year older than her, "I ain't afraid of punk-ass villains! One at a time or together, I'll take you all on!"

"Get her!"

"I got her!"

"How is she so fast!?"

"My nose!"

"Gah!"

"Oof!"

The fight, if it could be called that, lasted barely sixty seconds. It was a one-sided massacre. Punches were exchanged. Quirks were activated, utilized and tossed about despite being against the law.

And words not meant to come out of eleven-year-old mouths were spoken with urgency. But when everything was said and done, the last blows dealt and the mostly empty park grew quiet, only one person remained standing above the others.

"Hah... hah... hah..."

Her unexpected savior huffed and puffed, "They weren't... so... tough," blood trickled from a nose caught by a glancing blow. Knuckles bore countless scrapes from repeatedly smashing faces. The front of her shirt was covered in mulch and dirt. And her knees were bloodied. Yet despite having beaten six bullies, the girl looked little worse for wear, "You okay?"

Tsuyu sniffed, "T-Thanks."

"Heh! No problem," pounding a hand against her chest and grinning, the weird girl rolled over one of the defeated bullies with her foot, exposing a bruised and bloodied face showing indentations from her fists, "Hey, I'm Ryuko Matoi. So, uh, these guys didn't hurt you or anything, right?"

"No," Tsuyu wiped the tears from her eyes, "And I'm Tsuyu... Tsuyu Asui, but you can call me Tsu."

"Alright, Tsu, glad yer okay!" late summer inevitably brought change, good and bad. Crickets, fireflies and other insects emerged from their burrows, drawn out of hiding by the fading heat and approaching autumn, "Oh, and ya don't need to worry about these sorry punks," even though she was covered in blood, some of it hers, but most of it not, Ryuko smiled as gnats and other small insects buzzed around her face, "Because if they think about revenge or something, I'll just have to kick their butts twice as hard!"

Tsuyu ribbited.

"Hey, uh," Ryuko grumbled in the back of her throat before pursing her lips, "I hate to ask, but can ya keep this a secret? My dad sorta

doesn't like it when I sneak out of the house."

There was an intense look in Ryuko's eyes.

And a little desperation.

So, she nodded, which was the best option.

"Great!" the bloodied girl laughed, "I bet yer wondering how I saved you, right?" she really hadn't wondered, but now that Ryuko mentioned it, Tsuyu realized it was actually a really good question, "It's ain't anything special. I just saw these punks..." Ryuko emphasized 'punks' by kicking a little mulch on one of the bullies, "... outside my window talking about some girl with a weird Quirk. So, I followed them here," she grinned, "Ya know, I thought they'd be tougher! Heck, you could have beaten them yourself with your ultra-amazing frog Quirk!"

Tsuyu didn't know how much she'd needed to hear someone say that about her Quirk.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

"Uh, Ryuko," unsure whether or not to say anything, she felt her stomach turning inside-out, "I think you're bleeding."

Said preteen, instead of panicking or crying like a normal girl, looked at her hand like it wasn't important, "Eh, I'll be fine. Cause of my Quirk, I tend to bleed a lot."

Tsuyu thought about Ryuko's answer far more than she should have, "Your Quirk?"

"Yup! I have, like, way too much blood because of my Quirk," the blood coating Ryuko's fingers, as well as her scraped knees and

elbow, exploded into life, as if struck by a current of electricity, "Dad says that's why I need to always eat a lot of meat," a look of pure concentration crossed Ryuko's face as the blood floating around her fingers morphed into a rough approximation of a cube, then a sphere, before vanishing through her skin, "I *hate* hamburgers, but if I don't eat enough meat, I get all woozy and dizzy. So, ya know, my life sucks."

Fireflies illuminated the park around them.

Crickets chirped.

"Hey, want to get some ice cream? There's this place that has, like, a hundred different flavors," sticking a hand into her shorts, Ryuko stepped into the grass, "My treat."

Tsuyu didn't know what to do.

Her mom and dad would be worried if she didn't call them soon.

And she needed to make sure her little brother and sister did their homework.

But Ryuko was so nice, "Sure, Ryu."

"Ryu?" an eyebrow disappeared into disheveled hair.

"Tsu," Tsuyu pointed at herself, then at Ryuko, "And Ryu."

My Bloody Academia

The Present Day

"I met Ryuko during our first year of junior high," Tsuyu croaked as Mina and Toru leaned a little closer, "That's pretty much it."

"What!?"

The immense weight of disappointment threatened to suffocate Mina as she grabbed Tsuyu's shoulders and began shaking the froggy girl, "There's gotta be more! A villain! Schoolyard bullies! Neglectful parents! Something! Anything! Don't leave me hanging here!"

Each question was accompanied by a slightly harder shake.

"Please. Stop. Shaking. Me," Tsuyu begged, her head snapping back and forth.

"Hey!"

A hand latched onto Mina's shoulder. Another grabbed Tsuyu. And with far less effort than someone her size needed, Ryuko shoved her way into the conversation, "The hell's going on here?" it was a question that didn't need an answer. Or rather, it wasn't necessary. Because Mina's deer-caught-in-the-headlights expression was enough for Ryuko to realize what was going down, "I thought I told you to mind your own business."

I'm *soooooorrrrrryyy*," the pink-skinned girl begged.

When Ryuko smiled, a not-so-friendly expression, Toru and Mina grimaced.

"Heh, I knew you couldn't resist snooping about my life, so me and Tsu came up with a plan to screw with your plan," shooting her gossipy classmate a shit-eating smirk, Ryuko rolled her eyes, "All I had to do was get a little too angry and you'd go running straight to Tsu," a snort and a chuckle, "Pretty good acting, huh? Bet I really fooled you," as the weight of the deception settled on Mina's shoulders, leaving said girl gasping for relevance and answers, Ryuko gave one last shove, "Especially since there's actually an interesting story."

"What!?" Toru exclaimed.

"Yeah, and guess what? You're *never* gonna hear it," bag slung over her shoulder, Ryuko patted a catatonic Mina on the back, enjoying the pink-skinned girl's despair just a little more than necessary, "Consider this *payback* for that bull about me and Bakugo. Now, c'mon, Tsu, let's get to class before Ectoplasm blows a gasket."

Mina's scream of despair could be heard all the way to the teacher's lounge.

Chapter 18

As he leaned closer to the microphone, Katsuki Bakugo cleared his throat, "I just want to say... I'm gonna win."

"What?"

"Damn him!"

"The hell did he just say!?"

"Screw him!"

"Why would you be so disrespectful!?" Tenya Ida couldn't believe what he heard, "You're representing us all!"

"It's not my fault the rest of you are just steppingstones to my victory," giving a thumbs down to four-eyes, Bakugo ignored the screaming extras. It wasn't his fault their Quirks didn't measure up to his greatness. UA might have accepted them, but only one or two posed any sort of challenge.

Todoroki and Matoi.

"The hell you just say, Blood Bank?"

"You deaf? I said I ain't doing this!"

"The hell you aren't! You're gonna do this or so help me I'll - "

"You'll what? Blow me up? Go ahead! It means I'll have an excuse not to do this!"

The way things currently stood, coming out on top was going to be a piece of cake.

"Only one person here stands a chance of winning. And that's me," the peanut gallery was screaming in his face, but he'd couldn't care less, "The rest of you might as well drop out."

And he *hated* that.

"Err, well said," Midnight struggled maintaining her persona as Katsuki Bakugo slouched off the stage. If he'd intended on provoking his classmates, then he succeeded. Half of them wanted to tear him apart. The other half couldn't believe he'd say something so scandalous, "Now, without further ado, it's time for us to get started! This is where you begin feeling the pain! The first event of the sports festival begins now!"

Behind the heroine, who adhered to the spirit of the costume regulation code, if not the letter, a holographic wheel cycled through events faster and faster by the second.

"What could it be?"

The R-Rated Heroine's rhetorical question was answered when the blurred wheel abruptly stopped, "And here it is!"

[OBSTACLE RACE]

[THREAT LEVEL - FUN!]

"So, it's going to be an obstacle course?" as soon as the event popped up, Midoriya's mind shifted into second gear, "That could mean pretty much anything."

"That's it?"

To his right, sounding like she'd rather be literally anywhere else, Ryuko's scoff was matched only by her boredom, "UA must've gotten cold feet after last year's PR disaster."

Midoriya stared at Ryuko like she'd grown a second head, "Huh?"

"Surely you remember the scandal, Midoriya? It was on all the major networks," unintentionally acting as the de facto negotiator between Midoriya and Matoi, Ida chopped one arm while doing his best to push Bakugo's flagrant disrespect towards UA out of mind and body, "The first event was Quirk Dodgeball with teams of five students determined via random lottery. Both the top ranked student at UA and the class representative from Class 3-B were simultaneously eliminated due to unfortunate luck and their teammates."

"Yeah, of course I remember," Midoriya raised a finger, still confused, "I just don't see how it was a PR disaster."

Ryuko clicked her tongue against her teeth, "Because half of the rich bigshots lost millions when their meal ticket got kicked in the balls."

Every male student within earshot winced.

"All eleven classes will participate in this treacherous contest!" picking up where she'd left off, Midnight turned around, hands planted on her waist and heeled boots *clacking* against concrete, "The track is four kilometers around the outside of this stadium and filled with some of the most devious and cunning obstacles imaginable," a tongue sensuously and slowly licked smooth lips, "Of course, I don't want to restrain anyone. At least, not yet. As long as you stay on the track, you're free to do whatever your heart desires! Wait! What's this!?"

Something on the screen changed.

"Can it be?" snapping her flogger whip, Midnight enthusiastically drank the collective unease and nervousness of UA's first-year classes, "A surprise twist?"

"A surprise?"

"What?"

"Oh man, this is going to be bad."

"If you thought a *mere* obstacle race would sate our appetites, think again! Here at UA, the motto is Plus Ultra!" a snap of her flogger whip prematurely ended any arguments, drawing every set of eyes to her masochistic smirk, "The course is full of dangerous and deadly obstacles, but your greatest challenge won't be what's in front of your eyes, but what's lurking behind you!"

Reactions were somewhat mixed as an older student sauntered, because that really was the best way to describe how they emerged from the nearest tunnel, onto the stage.

Some recognized him.

Others didn't.

But as soon as she saw him, Ryuko's mood soured, "Oh, god damn it."

"Wait, you know him?" Uraraka couldn't place where she'd seen this guy, only that his face looked familiar.

"He's one of UA's Big Three," with more excitement than nervousness, Midoriya answered, "One of the three students said to be stronger than most pros. He was in the sports festival last year. Of course... well..."

Ida coughed into his hand, "... let's just forget about that, shall we?"

"As soon as the event begins, our secret obstacle will wait five minutes before pursuing you!" Midnight pointed at the screen, which showed a miniature Mirio impatiently staring at his watch before running towards an exit sign, "He'll be running at a steady eleven kilometers per hour. Not too fast. And not too slow. But if he catches up to you? ELIMINATION!"

On stage, Mirio Togata grinned a smile only fractionally less disarming than All Might's.

"I know this is probably a big surprise," the student closest to All Might laughed despite the growing tension, "To be honest, when I was asked to do this, my immediate thought was to refuse. But then I thought, well, doing this would be the perfect opportunity to help up-and-coming heroes one final time before I graduate. So, here I am," a collective bewilderment spread throughout the stadium, "Think of me as a time limit. As long as you move fast enough, you'll be fine. Oh, uh, do you think five minutes is enough time?" going off-script, Mirio turned to Midnight, "Seven minutes might be better."

Midnight didn't agree, "We already discussed this! No last-minute changes! Now, if there are no further questions, take your places, contestants!"

Egged on by the R-Rated Heroine and tens of thousands of people, everyone shuffled towards the starting line. Each step accompanied by raucous cheering, civilians and heroes alike offering support. Megaphones amplified voices. An insignificant fraction utilized their Quirks to get better views only for security to quickly, yet gently, inform them to either deactivate said abilities or leave the stadium.

And roughly in the middle of the pack, Tsuyu swallowed the lump in her throat, "You sure about this, Ryu?"

"Pretty sure," hands in her pockets and a sincere 'screw this' look on her face, Ryuko scoffed, "Can't say UA's gonna be thrilled, but they can't expel me for doing nothing," she paused to look around, eyes drifting towards the V.I.P. boxes above the stands, "By the way, you remember free ice cream day back in middle school?"

A finger tipped against Tsuyu's lips, "You think that's what's going to happen?"

Ryuko dug a finger into her ear as one of the three green lights fizzled, "Yup."

"ON YOUR MARK!"

As a second light disappeared, a collective 'gulp' swept the crowd.

"GET SET!"

As the third, and final, light vanished, Midnight's sadistic enthusiasm pierced the heavens, "... BEGIN!"

A circus.

Ryuko couldn't come up with another word to describe the chaos unfolding before her eyes. It was a circus. A goddamn circus. As dust filled the air, choking her lungs and filling both her mouth and nose, she stood ramrod, one hand scratching an itch on her back and the other rubbing her neck. People shoved their way towards the obstacle course. Screams and shouts dissolved into nonsense she couldn't translate over the noise. Elbows and fists and feet flew in every direction. And that was before the living stampede reached the entrance itself. Still standing right where she'd started, Ryuko casually observed eleven classes worth of idiots simultaneously try forcing their way through a small hole.

Which meant *nobody* got out.

Except Tsuyu, who pulled the same stunt she did back in junior high, only without her and Habuko along for the ride.

"Man," her hair fluttered in a breeze, "I could really go for some ice cream."

"AND WE'RE OFF TO A RACING START!"

In the commentator's box, privy to enough cameras to provoke federal investigation, Present Mic clenched his hands, **"HOW 'BOUT SOME FUNNY COMMENTARY, MUMMY MAN?"**

Wrapped from head to toe in bandages, arms immobilized in plaster and yet somehow dressed in his costume, Aizawa momentarily

wondered if jumping out the window was enough to kill him, "How did you rope me into this?"

"SO, WHAT DO YOU THINK THE FIRST OBSTACLE WILL BE?"

Resigned to his cruel fate, Aizawa's dry sarcasm penetrated straight through the bandages, " ***THE DOOR .***"

"IT LOOKS LIKE EVERYONE'S EAGER TO LEAVE THE STADIUM WITH TSUYU ASUI FROM CLASS 1-A TAKING AN EARLY LEAD! WAIT! SOMEONE SEEMS TO HAVE MISSED THE MESSAGE,"

Present Mic's eyebrows raised high and proud, ***"IT APPEARS RYUKO MATOI FROM CLASS 1-A HASN'T MOVED AN INCH! SHE'S NOT GONNA MAKE A GOOD IMPRESSION JUST STANDING AROUND LIKE A STATUE!"***

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched.

There was something she wanted to tell Present Mic to shove up his ass, but she restrained herself, not out of respect for the guy, but because she didn't want to get fined.

"Still plan on boycotting the games, huh?"

When Mako appeared out of nowhere, standing next to her like she'd always been there, Ryuko lazily shrugged one shoulder higher than the other, "Yup."

"Aw, you sure?" now Mako sounded upset.

Her eyes tracking the aftermath of someone's Quirk rolling across the field, Ryuko gave the weird object a small kick, "Thought you were gonna support that brainwashing punk."

"I was planning on cheering for Shinso since he's determined to become a great hero like All Might, but that would make us rivals. Former best friends destined to fight over and over again," with a drawn-out sigh somehow ending in a yawn, Mako knelt onto the

ground, pursed her lips and curiously poked the weirdly-shaped mushroom resembling a turnip, "Even if winning would be nice, I'd never want to fight my best friend."

Several things happened at the same time - a blast of cold, people screaming and cursing, multiple explosions and various Quirks activating.

"And even if I wanted to be a hero, not that I want to, my Quirk's like a light switch that only works half of the time. And only on Sundays," blind to the ice steadily creeping along the ground towards them, Mako puffed her cheeks, "Plus, my head gets all fuzzy whenever I see blood, which makes each trip to the back alley doctor a fun and exciting adventure."

There was a lot to unpack.

Ryuko didn't know where to start, "What? That's nonsense," ignoring the weirdness scratching the back of her mind, she watched the human blockage finish untangling itself, frowned and quickly added, more for her benefit than Mako's, "You've seen my Quirk loads of times."

"That's because we're besties!" an innocent smile settled upon Mako's face, "There's no way I could ever faint around my best friend!"

"EVEN THOUGH HER CLASSMATES ARE CURRENTLY RUNNING FOR THEIR LIVES, RYUKO MATOI SEEMS MORE INTERESTED IN SHOOTING THE BREEZE. DOES SHE KNOW THERE'S ONLY ONE MINUTE UNTIL THE FINAL OBSTACLE IS RELEASED UNTO THE WORLD!?"

"Oh, shut up," Ryuko *almost* gave Present Mic the finger.

Almost .

"It's too bad you're standing your ground on principle," as the crowd's attention turned towards the students actually participating in the obstacle race, Mako rocked on the soles of her shoes, "Mom and dad were really looking forward to watching you beat everyone."

Ryuko choked, emotions bouncing back and forth inside her heart.

"Dad even managed to sneak out of work," bunny hopping back onto her feet, Mako sighed, "My stupid brother got caught by the truant officer this morning, so he's stuck in detention until further notice. Guess they're gonna go home disappointed."

Each word hurt a little more.

And all Ryuko could do was listen, unable to even think of a half-assed excuse. Why hadn't Mako told her? Mako talked about everything. The weather, their teachers, Quirks, heroes, villains and even stuff that didn't exist. Except *this* . Except something this important. Or had she? Something almost like guilt squeezed her heart. It felt like she couldn't breathe. And when she looked closer, fingers numb and throat dry, Ryuko realized it actually was guilt.

Mako *had* told her about her parents.

But she'd been so focused on avoiding everything about the sports festival that it had slipped her mind.

Unable to think of something, or really anything, to say, Ryuko opened and closed her mouth, "Oh... I... uh... where are they?"

"Right there!"

It was so quick she almost thought Mako didn't know where her parents were.

But sure enough, she saw Mako's mom and dad in the nosebleed section, waving a gigantic banner with her name misspelled in bold, red letters.

"They came all this way to see me?" the words felt wrong coming out of her mouth, "I thought you told them I wasn't doing this?"

"I did," Mako nodded, enthusiasm waning with every breath "But they were convinced you'd eventually change your mind and have fun like the rest of us..."

Ryuko didn't know what to say.

BEEP!

The sound, carried out of the stadium and across UA's campus through amplifiers and speakers, snapped her back to reality.

Blood flowed through her skin akin to crimson rivulets, crisscrossing one another before solidified into a sword.

As the footsteps grew increasingly closer, Ryuko pushed Mako to safety with one hand, pivoted sharply and swung towards the only remotely tangible target. It was a long shot. One hell of a long shot. Less than one in a billion. But despite the impossible odds, Mirio *stopped* at the exact distance for her sword to gently press against his muscular chest without so much as slicing his uniform.

"Get out of here, Mako," a bead of sweat trickled down her face from the midday heat, "I'll handle this guy."

"Sure! Alright!"

Already halfway down the tunnel, Mako's voice echoed into oblivion, "Good luck, Ryuko!"

Ryuko forced herself to smile.

But her relief was temporary when Mirio jumped backwards, stretched his legs and proceeded to jog in place, completely *ruining* the tension, "What the hell are you doing?"

"Getting ready!"

"For what?"

"My job, of course. I *am* an obstacle."

"Are you serious?"

"You know, anyone else and I'd say they were stalling for time. Something a true hero would do to help their comrades," as if they were shooting the breeze, Mirio stopped his jogging long enough to scratch his nose, "But we both know that's not why you're doing this. In fact, from your expression, you're thinking about stabbing me, aren't you?"

Ryuko smirked without taking her eyes off him, "Too bad actually *hitting* you ain't that straightforward."

"That's an amazing sword you got there, Ryuko," giving off an air of genuine curiosity, Mirio cheerfully laughed, "It sure looks dangerous. Bet you've been practicing, huh."

"WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT! IT APPEARS RYUKO MATOI HAS DECIDED TO TAKE ON THE OBSTACLE BY HERSELF! TRULY INSPIRING! BUT WILL SHE BE ABLE TO HOLD HIM BACK?"

"ODDS ARE, SHE WON'T,"

head throbbing, Aizawa wished he could visit Recovery Girl, if only to deal with his migraine, **"ALL HE NEEDS TO DO IS RUN TO THE ENTRANCE AND SHE'S ELIMINATED."**

"Spoilsports," looking up at the stands, Mirio breathed in, exhaled and smirked, "But he's right. Against me, well... anyway, no matter what I say, you're going to fight me, aren't you? So, guess there's really no point trying to convince you to step aside."

Ryuko spread her feet, placing herself between the older student and the entrance.

"Let's get one thing straight before I shove my sword up your ass - I don't give a crap about the sports festival or making impressions for heroes too focused on merchandising," metal groaned as she flipped the blade, sunlight gleaming off its deceptively sharp edge, "This is personal," just over thirty feet separated them, "And I wouldn't be smiling. Not unless you want to taste the ground."

The older student nodded along, still smiling, "I have the feeling you're not telling me something,"

"Do I have to spell it out for you?" her chances of actually *beating* Mirio were lower than Mako figuring out what her Quirk could do. Even with the half-assed advantage accidentally dropped into her lap, Ryuko wasn't stupid, "You're not wearing that special costume," yet she smiled when Mirio froze, "So unless you're planning on flashing the world *again*, you're gonna have to be *real* careful using your Quirk."

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Mirio laughing was a bad sign.

"You got me there!"

A *really* bad sign.

Every fiber of her being was screaming how bad of an idea this was. And despite controlling every drop of blood in her body, Ryuko's cheeks erupted into a crimson blush as memories of what happened the first time her dad brought her to Nighteye's agency surfaced in her mind.

A memory of Mirio popping out of the floor in front of her - completely and totally naked - having accidentally phased through his uniform.

"Well, you're right about one thing - if I'm going to beat you, it's going to need to be the old-fashioned way," sliding one foot backwards, *Lemillion* shifted into a boxing stance, toned muscles bulging

beneath rolled sleeves, "Surprised? Yeah, this is probably not what you expected, but I'm ready whenever you are! Oh! And don't worry about holding back! Not that you were planning to, just that, well, hmm, good luck, Ryuko!"

Chapter 19

Her head was foggy, as if she'd been sleeping for days.

Slowly opening one eye, she recognized the sterile ceiling and the overwhelming lemony scent of disinfectants.

"... the hell happened?"

"*POWERRRRRRR!*"

Oh, right.

"Ugh..."

Her head hurt. Her stomach hurt. Her *everything* hurt. Even places she didn't know existed *hurt*. But it was her own fault. She *had* to fight Nighteye's intern, a guy whose Quirk made him untouchable. Sitting up, one hand drifting to her stomach and the other rubbing her jaw, Ryuko looked around the infirmary while wracking her brain for information. Memories between Togata's sucker punch and regaining consciousness. But she couldn't. The last thing she could remember was the uncomfortable feeling of knuckles driving themselves into her stomach and a strange violet mist.

"Damn it..." messy hair falling in front of her eyes, she looked out the window at the setting sun, "... how long was I out?"

"Six and a half hours."

She hadn't expected someone to answer.

"Give or take ten minutes," shambling into the infirmary, still resembling a walking mummy, Aizawa slid the door closed with his foot, "You were only supposed to be out for a couple of minutes, but the amount of blood in your body increased the threshold for chemicals to take effect," he stopped near Recovery Girl's desk, "By

the time you finally succumbed to Midnight's Quirk, the cameras were forced to cut away from her. Needless to say, she wasn't exactly thrilled Cementoss had to take over until she changed into her spare costume."

Ryuko didn't know whether to snort or laugh.

"Talk about a cheap shot," she didn't need a fancy degree to figure out why Aizawa was giving her the cold shoulder, "But unless I missed something, I didn't break any rules."

Aizawa didn't raise his voice, "Do you seriously think that's why I'm here?"

She did.

Not anymore.

"I'm here because we need to talk," in that same dull tone, he stepped closer.

That didn't mean she had to listen, "Talk? About what?"

"About why you're at UA," his *frustration* snatched the question from her throat, "So, until I give you permission, you're going to do nothing but listen. Got it?"

She nodded.

Which was all the permission Aizawa needed.

"I've had the pleasure of reading a police report concerning a certain 'incident' at Seiai Academy," his bloodshot eyes narrowed, "You attacked an entire class and their teacher. Even if it was self-defense, the only reason it happened was because *you* believed Couturier was a student at a school you didn't know existed until you ran away from home. If not for All Might going out of his way to defend you, you'd be spending the next three years in juvenile detention."

Her hands clenched in frustration.

But she clawed back the urge to tell him to shut up.

"You're not the first person to lose someone they love to a villain," the corner of her mouth twitched, "I can name *seven* heroes who watched a villain murder their wife, husband or *child* . And then taunted them about it. You're not the first to feel that pain. And despite All Might's efforts, you won't be the last," nuance was something the erasure hero understood all too well, but sometimes honesty was better, "Everyone deals with grief in their own way. Your problem is how *you're* dealing with it. You're bottling your emotions," she chewed her cheek hard enough to draw blood, "That isn't healthy. And what makes it worse is that you refuse to accept you need help. Which brings me to why I'm here."

She could hear every word.

Whether she wanted to or not.

"You passed the written and practical components of the entrance exam with flying colors," and he still wasn't done, "And your grades are exceptional. On paper, you're more than qualified for the hero program," she ignored the squeaky wheels of Recovery Girl's chair as Aizawa tried, failed and tried again to sit down, "The problem is your attitude. You're not as self-centered and arrogant as Bakugo. And you aren't pushing UA's honor code to the breaking point like Mineta. However, despite their significant character flaws, they both want to be at UA. They both want to be *heroes* . You, on the other hand, *don't* . You've said so yourself. So, again, why are you here?"

She tried blocking his voice.

But it was impossible.

"If it were up to me, I'd suspend you from the hero program," his disappointment was palpable, "Unfortunately, the crowd enjoyed your 'match' too much for that to be an option."

How he sounded annoyed and bored at the same time left her head reeling.

"So, for the moment, suspending you would be far more trouble than it's worth," sarcasm dripped from Aizawa's existence, "The last thing I need is UA's board of directors breathing down my neck."

Ryuko could *feel* his annoyance.

"Instead," and she instinctively leaned away, "I'll give you some advice."

It was awkward as hell.

"You have talent. And a Quirk people would give anything to have. But talent and strength aren't enough to earn the right to be called a hero. Or a provisional license," he emphasized the last two words, "So, either get your act together and figure out where you want to go... or drop out of the hero program and find something else to do. It's your call."

A minute passed in silence.

And then another.

"Oh, right," Aizawa blinked owlishly, "You can talk now."

She didn't need his freaking permission.

"... you're an ass, you know that?" that might not have been the best thing to say to someone who wanted to kick her out of UA, but it was the most honest thing she *could* say.

"Not what I expected a student on the verge of suspension to tell their teacher, but at least you're being honest," it was hard to tell if Aizawa was upset or amused. And the bandages didn't help, "Well, now that you've gotten that out of your system, you'll find a change of clothes on the desk over there," he swiveled just enough to look at said table, "Get dressed, go home and think about what you want to

do. You have two days to get your head on straight," taking her silence as proof she was listening, he awkwardly managed to push himself out of the chair, "If you still don't know why you're at UA, don't bother coming back."

She watched him walk away.

She watched him bump his leg against Recovery Girl's desk.

"Hey!"

The linen blanket flew across the room as she scrambled out of bed, "There's something I gotta know."

"Let me guess," Aizawa sounded more sarcastic than normal, "You want to know who won the sports festival."

"Yeah," the lowering sun cast orangish-red light across the room, "I was kind of *drugged* for most of it."

Aizawa stared at her.

She stared back *harder* .

"Are you *that* interested?" her silence spoke louder than words ever could, "Alright, if you insist, although you'll probably be able to watch everything once you get home," a familiar exhaustion steadily crept back into his posture, "Everyone in the hero program made it to the second event. Except for you, of course. There was also a girl from the support program and two students from general department."

"Mako?"

"Was she that girl you were talking with before embarrassing yourself on national television?" when she nodded affirmatively, Aizawa rolled his eyes, "Then yes, your friend finished the obstacle course in dead last. She didn't qualify for the finals, but she really gave Bakugo a run for his money. It's very confusing, but she somehow snatched one of his headbands in plain view."

Her head tilted sideways.

That sounded like Mako.

But pulling off something like that against Bakugo was just... weird.

"Todoroki, Uraraka, Bakugo and Tokoyami were the final four competitors in the one-on-one tournament," her eyes grew vacant as her brain worked overtime processing everything that happened while she was drugged and unconscious, "Bakugo beat Tokoyami while Uraraka almost managed to ring-out Todoroki. As for the final match," Aizawa stared off into space, "In all honesty, it could have gone either way, but in the end, Bakugo knocked Todoroki out of bounds."

A fly buzzed around her head.

"So..." she gingerly tested the waters, "... how's Bakugo handling winning?"

"About as well as expected."

Her teacher's voice was so flat she momentarily believed he was joking, "So, if you decide to stick with the program, you might want to prepare for that."

"Wait! I have another question!"

The floor was cold, "How did Tsu do?"

"She placed sixteenth overall," Aizawa shrugged while somehow sliding open the door with his foot, "She probably could have reached the quarter-finals if Todoroki hadn't been her opponent. Oh, that reminds me. If you're not in the mood to talk to reporters, I'd recommend *not* leaving through the front entrance."

Ryuko said nothing as her bastard of a homeroom teacher slouched out the door and back to whatever hole he'd crawled out of.

"... what I want to do?"

It was a stupid question. She knew what she wanted to do! She wanted... her thoughts screeched to a crashing halt. For as long as she could remember, she'd wanted to be a teacher or a doctor. It's what she told her dad. And it's what she told her guidance counselors no matter how many times they'd 'mentioned' how useful her Quirk would be if she were a pro hero. But now? She *still* didn't want to be a hero, but after everything that happened, her dreams felt distant, like they were from an entirely different lifetime. Couturier still needed to pay for taking away her dad. But what was she going to do afterwards? Go back to school? Go to college and get a degree? Or would she just keep going and be a hero? This wasn't the life she wanted.

And it wasn't the life she chose.

But it was the life she had.

Clenching and relaxing her fingers, eyes staring at the floor in front of her toes, Ryuko suddenly backtracked.

"Wait? Reporters?"

Chapter 20

One Day Later

(UA Sports Festival - Day 2)

"Here you go."

The middle-aged man searched his pockets for his wallet. It took a moment. After all, these weren't his normal pants. Those were at the dry cleaners. But soon enough, he discovered what he was looking for. And after handing over the exact amount of money plus or minus a couple of yen, he grabbed the plastic-wrapped sandwich and decaffeinated soda off the counter, told the clerk to keep the change and walked through the doors and back onto the streets of Musutafu.

"What a day."

His messy blue hair, disheveled to the point one could successfully argue he hadn't taken a shower in weeks, stood out in a crowd. Gait unsteady, shoulders hunched and five-o'clock noticeable at just past twelve thirty in the afternoon, he tucked the sandwich underneath his arm. The UA sports festival was in full swing after a surprisingly popular first day. There was hardly anyone on the streets. Eyes hidden behind a pair of sunglasses and tie loosened so he could breathe, he began the long and boring walk back to Musutafu Community College.

Only someone was standing in his way.

"When you said you wanted to talk, I assumed you would attend my lecture on support gear development, then meet me afterwards," caught with his hand inside the metaphorical cookie jar, Aikuro Mikisugi's eyebrows rose over his sunglasses as the school-aged girl standing between himself and where he needed to go frowned, "Not interrupt my lunch break."

Ryuko ignored his sarcasm.

"Oh, boy, well, I suppose I have some time to talk," he really didn't. Between setting up the presentation involving volunteers possessing Heteromorphic Quirks and a few last-minute changes, he was a little strapped for time. But a quick look at his watch, which involved maneuvering his sandwich and soda, proved he'd wildly overestimated how long it would take to walk across town and get lunch, "There's a park near the community college. If you're willing to walk with me, we can talk about whatever you want over there. Sound reasonable?"

It took all of five minutes to reach the park he mentioned.

Freshly blossoming trees covered the park with shades of pink and red.

It was relaxing.

It was peaceful.

And downright miserable, hands tucked into her jacket, Ryuko desperately tried pretending she wasn't following some stranger through a mostly empty park, "Well?"

"Don't be impatient," sandwich in one hand and soda in the other, the man known as Mikisugi lazily shrugged, "There's still plenty of time for us to get to know each other."

"Get to know - " Ryuko stumbled mid-step, caught herself and promptly snapped, "This ain't a date!"

"Who said anything about a date?" as they passed a statue of All Might holding a globe in one hand, pigeons and assorted birds camping on its shoulders, Mikisugi's amusement was obvious, even if she couldn't see his face, "Hey, you're the one whose mind went straight to the gutter, not mine," tendrils of blood trickled between her

fingers, which the crusty old teacher ignored, "Besides, you wouldn't hurt a defenseless old man over a bad joke, would you?"

"Depends on what you have to say," her own rhetorical question was accompanied by a not-so-rhetorical manifestation of her Quirk.

He was unfazed.

"Using your Quirk in public without a license?" there was something about his voice that didn't piss her off so much as make her question her sanity in following him, "Pretty risky. If someone saw you, you could get into serious trouble."

Scratch that.

She was pissed *and* questioning her sanity in following him.

"Oh, really?" begrudgingly, and with great restraint, Ryuko deactivated her Quirk, "Last I checked, using my Quirk to take down a creepy old man is perfectly legal."

A single blue eyebrow rose above the aviator sunglasses, "Geez, you really are scary, Matoi."

His sarcasm was dry enough to start a fire.

Without missing a step, Mikisugi sauntered towards an out-of-order fountain off the beaten path, leaves and branches clogging murky brown water and sat down, "Well, we're here and my lunch is getting cold. So... what do you want to know?"

"Let's start with the obvious," hands jammed inside her jacket, Ryuko glanced to the right, then the left, then snorted, "How do you know my dad?"

The man scratched his stubbled chin.

"Figured you'd ask that," he rubbed the back of his neck, "Well, do you want the long story or the short story?" it wasn't so much a

question as asking for permission he didn't actually need, "It all started when I was but a humble graduate student at Tohoku University. Your father was my advisor. Even back then, his knowledge on Quirks was second to none. If you asked him a question about a Quirk, he'd have twenty different answers," a crinkle of plastic reached her ears when Mikisugi unwrapped his sandwich, "It wasn't easy. But if it weren't for your dad breathing down my neck twenty-four hours a day, I never would have earned my degree in mechanical support engineering."

An eyebrow rose as she absorbed his unkempt, unshaven and all-around unattractive appearance.

"Now, now, you shouldn't judge a book by its cover," turkey, ham and cheese were waved in her general direction, "After all, who do you think designed the Seki Tekko?"

"That was you?" disbelief tore its way out of her throat.

"I'm no high-order tailor, but I have a few tricks up my sleeves," his awkward smile was almost reassuring in the same way a rabid dog made you drop your guard, "When Isshin asked me to design a support item for you, I was honored. If only I'd known how difficult your Quirk was. I had to call several people and cash in some rather expensive favors to collect the necessary materials. Really *expensive* favors."

"Yeah, that's a real shame," ignoring her own stomach growling at the smell of his food, Ryuko rolled her eyes, "Can we get back on track?"

"Patience is a virtue, you know."

She ignored that.

"Well, after graduation and spending a couple of months traveling the country, I accepted an offer to work at I-Island while Isshin left Tohoku University to accept a research position at Revocs," the

guy's chewing was almost obnoxious. Each bite slower than the last, "For a while I was content designing groundbreaking support gear. But then I met someone really special. And I realized spending twenty-three hours a day in a lab wasn't for me," he almost sounded proud of himself, "So, I handed in my resignation and moved back to Japan, got myself a job at Shiketsu High and, after only a couple of years, was promoted to head of their development studio. Pretty neat, huh?"

It wasn't neat because she couldn't care less .

Yet she pushed that aside to focus on the important questions, "Dad worked at Revocs?"

"Support development is a cutthroat business. If a company misinterprets how somebody's Quirk works - for example, creating fire versus heating the surrounding air - they can lose customers. Sure, Revocs was fine most of the time, but every now and then, someone with a Quirk like enhanced regeneration or petrification walks through the front door. That was when they'd call Isshin for a second opinion," his sandwich was little more than crumbs as he scratched his chin and stared sideways, "So, when your father decided to retire, you can guess Revocs wasn't thrilled. The way I heard it, his boss offered him quite a lot of money to stick around, but Isshin cared more about raising you than a cushy seven-figure salary."

Ryuko opened her mouth, thought better and looked away with a pout, "So, you seriously know nothing about anything?"

"I'm sorry I couldn't be more helpful, Matoi," shaking his head, Mikisugi offered an apology, "I'm just Isshin's former student. Not an underground vigilante or a disguised pro hero."

"Yeah, right," she muttered, annoyed by her treacherous brain imagining gun running around in spandex.

"But it's the truth - huh?" oblivious to what she was currently thinking, the half-dead professor looked at his cheap watch, which had a visible crack on the glass, "Time sure does fly when you're reminiscing about the past," groaning as he stood up, Mikisugi scratched someplace south of his back, "It's been nice chatting, Matoi, but I better get going. If I don't get back soon, someone might think I'd been kidnapped by a nefarious villain."

She'd long since stopped caring why the man said.

Which was her first mistake.

Because when she blinked, he was already on top of her.

"Remain calm," the way he whispered into her ear was downright *flirtatious*, "And act perfectly natural."

Caught by surprise, Ryuko tried backpedaling out of the situation only for her foot to catch against the edge of the fountain, sending her falling onto algae-covered stone, "N-Natural!?"

"That's right, the less noise, the better," she refused to believe it, but purple light was shining from his goddamn nipples, "As long as you remain calm, *Fascination*," with an impossible accent, he swept a hand through his hair, removing his sunglasses in the same motion, "Should keep our conversation *private* ."

Blood gushed through her skin, solidifying into a sword which she immediately used to defend herself, "W-What the hell are you doing!?"

Mikisugi's smirk was almost seductive as he curled his fingers around her Quirk and gently pushed it away from his face, "Why, acting naturally, of course."

Eyes widening under the aggravating assault on her personal space, Ryuko reared one foot up and slammed it into the freaky bastard's stomach, "Nothing about this is natural!"

"Try not to raise your voice," as a middle-aged woman jogged down the sidewalk only a couple dozen meters behind him, engrossed in her music rather than the display unfolding in immediate view, the pervert sighed sensually as the top button of his shirt spontaneously unbuttoned itself, "It would be weird if someone saw us like this. An older man with a young and vulnerable teenager is perfect material for the tabloids."

Another button popped open.

And she saw a nipple.

A blush quickly infected her cheeks while her arm slowly rotated counterclockwise, "F-Fuck you!" the pervert's head whipped sideways, courtesy of her misshapen sword impacting his face, "You keep strippin' and your shirt ain't the only thing coming off! Now start talkin' or start dyin'!"

"Geez, isn't that a little harsh?" his cheek was smushed yet the pervert was unfazed, "I promise I'll tell you everything you want to know. I just have to know one thing first."

"Oh, yeah?" she grabbed his tie and pulled him closer, "And what's that!?"

Inches from his face, close enough to smell his rancid breath, she found his scandalous smile anything but reassuring.

"Are you - " the pervert continued ignoring the blade poking at his neck and the tie she'd used to strangle him if he did anything remotely inappropriate, " - an avid reader?"

That was it.

She was *finished* .

But before she could turn the freak into a pincushion, he pulled a book out of nowhere, "The Three Musketeers by Alexandre Dumas, one of the greatest French authors of all time."

Her blush deepened when another button on the pervert's shirt popped off, "Like I give a crap about a stupid book!"

"Aren't you at least curious?"

The sound of metal *sung* through the afternoon when she readjusted her grip on the sword, "I'm *more* curious about what's going to happen after I shove my Quirk up your ass!"

"For someone attending one of the most prestigious hero academies in the country, you're surprisingly unwilling to open your mind to new experiences," she almost stabbed him. It was touch and go. She *wanted* to stab him. Or, at the very least, beat him senseless since murder was unfortunately illegal, "Besides, this book belonged to your father," her Quirk, halfway transformed into a blunter form so she could bludgeon him, froze midswing, "He sent it to me a few weeks before his untimely passing."

Something like that would have normally been enough to make her reconsider turning his face inside-out.

But the light shining from the pervert's nipples overrode any possible mercy.

"Nice try," sarcasm gushed from her mouth as she twisted his tie and pulled him closer, "But just because *you* said it doesn't make it true."

"No, I suppose it doesn't."

There was something odd about the pervert's reaction, which was answered when he flipped open the front cover of the book, "Isshin's signature, on the other hand, makes it true."

"Anyone can forge dad's signature."

Mikisugi's face fell, "You *really* have trust issues, don't you?"

She deactivated her Quirk, pulling every last drop of blood back into her body so her *fist* was free to pound some sense into the bastard, "Says the exhibitionist."

"You, of all people, should know better than to judge a book by its cover."

Several things happened at once. Some of which Ryuko would never be able to explain to herself or anyone else. In a blur impossible to follow, the bastard rebuttoned his shirt, fixed his tie, un-swept his hair, regrew stubble and pulled out another pair of sunglasses, "For all you know, you might actually find it enjoyable," somehow freeing himself without so much as telling her fingers they were no longer holding him, the self-admitted exhibitionist waved over his shoulder, "Anyway, good luck with your studies, Ryuko. Stay in school and don't forget to brush your teeth."

Ryuko said nothing as the closeted pervert walked away like the last five minutes never happened.

Because what she *wanted* to say would have probably gotten her into a lot of trouble.

A bird chirped.

A handful of pigeons cooed on the nearby grass.

Several people walked by, including an old woman who offered a toothless smile she awkwardly returned before retreating in the completely opposite direction of her apartment, if only to avoid the *possibility* of running into the freak and his perverted glowing purple nipples.

Interlude 7

When his master decided it was time for him to meet one of his closest associates, he'd been intrigued. Especially when his doctor protested, claiming it was far too early for the two of them to meet. They never argued. Well, not in front of him. So, odds are, no matter how the meeting turned out, at the very least, it would be interesting. That's why he'd agreed with master's request. But when Kurogiri warped them into a fancy board room belonging to some rich company instead of wherever he'd expected, Shigaraki's mood had soured.

Talk about a major disappointment.

"Hmm," tapping a finger against one of the chairs, he scratched his neck, "Are you sure this is the right place?"

"I am certain," his personal teleporter's glowing eyes flickered as they examined the empty room, "We simply appear to have arrived a few minutes early. However, considering the importance of this meeting, making a good first impression would be beneficial to expanding the league's power and influence."

He didn't buy that, but who was he to judge.

"I suppose that makes sense," still scratching his neck, he grumbled, "But if there's one thing I can't stand, it's waiting. When are they going to get here?"

Clack!

She was fast.

Really fast.

One minute he and Kurogiri were alone, and the next a strange woman and *her* sidekick were standing in front of the doors. And boy,

was the woman bizarre. Perhaps nowhere near as tall as Nomu. Or even All Might. But it was her silver hair shining with a ridiculous rainbow-themed light that made him almost look away "Who are you?"

"Who I am is of no concern to you," a snap of her fingers and the dark-skinned woman standing next to her stepped into the shadows, "All you need to know is that I'm the one who graciously allowed dearest Nui to accompany your little organization."

He hated her already, "Hey, Kurogiri, is she the one master spoke of?"

"Yes," Kurogiri stood against the wall, glowing eyes intently watching every exchange and interaction, "She is Ragyo Kiryuin, an associate of your benefactor," and then he bowed his head at the woman, "Thank you for meeting with us on such short notice."

Shigaraki scratched his cheek.

What was going on?

Why the hell was Kurogiri treating this woman like she was important?

"Tomura, please introduce yourself."

And now Kurogiri was ordering *him* around?

"Why should I?" there was something off about Ragyo or whatever the woman's name was. He couldn't put his finger on it, but she looked really annoying.

"Forgive his rudeness," sounding almost desperate, Kurogiri swept a hand across his chest and bowed, "He's not quite used to decorum."

Now Kurogiri was apologizing *and* calling him rude?

"Oh, there's no need to apologize for the follies of youth," strutting across the board room, Ragyo sat down in the chair furthest from the door and rested her cheek against manicured fingernails, "He's pretty much everything I expected him to be," her pale skin and flawless white suit stood vibrant against the thunderstorms building outside. A contrast that brought out the cold malice in her maroon eyes, "It's no wonder his little field trip to UA failed so extravagantly. But that's what you get when you send a child to do a villain's work. You end up with nothing but disappointment."

"Disappointment? You say I'm a disappointment?"

As he kept scratching, something warm and wet ooze beneath his finger, "Just who the hell do you think you are?"

Kurogiri attempted to move yet found himself paralyzed, "Tomura! Don't!"

Unaware of the desperation driving such a bizarre reaction or that Kurogiri was currently fighting to simply remain standing, Shigaraki walked around the table, one finger trailing on its surface, "You sound important, but your smile is really starting to annoy me," another finger joined the first, "So, I'm wondering what would happen if I killed you," he was halfway down the table when a third finger joined the rest, "Master would probably be disappointed," every finger but his thumb touched the table, "But I'm sure he'll understand why I had to turn you to dust. He always does."

His thumb joined the others.

Yet *nothing* happened.

"How *drole*," as disbelief rendered Shigaraki speechless, Ragyo leaned forward and smiled a bit wider, "I honestly thought you'd have better manners."

Before the light finished reached his eyes, interacted with his nervous system and was deciphered by his brain, Ragyo's fingers

were already clamping around his throat.

"In that case," annoyance seeped from Ragyo's voice as her hair fluttered in the breeze created in the wake of her departure, "Allow *me* to provide you a life lesson, *young man* ."

Her pale fingers clenched his windpipe nearly shut while steadily lifting him further off the floor, " *He* might encourage your disrespectful behavior, but I won't," he was almost a foot above the woman's head, eyes widening behind Father and lips turning blue, "I tolerate your petulance because *he* believes you're important. Allow that piece of information to sink into your skull," all while she tightened her grasp, "If you were anything less than his disciple, you would have been dead the moment you *dared* speak to me with such disrespect!"

He desperately grabbed her wrists, her arms, anything he could reach with his hands.

But nothing was working.

"I accepted this meeting, pushing *everything else* to the wayside, to determine whether I should invest time and money into your organization," her fingers relaxed just enough to let him breath, "As the woman in charge of the largest support company in the country, I know a thing or two about risks and rewards," a cold and cruel smile stretched across the CEO's façade as she lifted him another couple of inches, "I've seen your plans. I've seen your objectives. You can't even kill All Might when the poor fool is on the verge of death. Why should I possibly invest *anything* into such a pathetic organization?"

"You're wrong..."

He coughed. He gasped. But Shigaraki never stopped glaring venomously at Ragyo, "My plan would have worked if your little toy hadn't lost to Ryuko Matoi," he felt those unnervingly thin fingers pull together, "Nomu was about to finish off All Might when she ruined

everything! If she had been just a little stronger, I would have won . It's all her fault!"

"Is that your answer?" eyes a darker shade of red than his own narrowed in faux amusement, "Blaming a young woman for your troubles is truly pathetic," and with a nearly effortless sweep, Ragyo tossed him away, caring little as he rolled across the carpet and slammed into a wall, "If you're going to lie, at least attempt to come up with something plausible."

Clack! Clack! Clack!

He nearly passed out from the impact. And the wounds he'd suffered at the hands of those so-called heroes hadn't fully healed. But gasping for air, fingers trembling and heart racing inside his chest, Shigaraki felt his vision turn red. He *slowly* struggled back onto his feet, supporting himself on a bruised elbow before grabbing the edge of a window, all but his pinky finger gripping polished metal, and steadily standing. His first attempt was a failure. But holding onto the wall with his all five fingers, something that didn't make sense because this woman wasn't Eraser Head and couldn't seal away someone's Quirk, he forced himself to stand, if only to wonder why Kurogiri wasn't helping him.

"Madam Kiryuin."

And there Kurogiri was, pretending like this woman was more important than him, "Are you satisfied with Tomura's performance?"

What?

"I am," Ragyo concurred with a malevolent smile, "Then again, how could I be disappointed with *his* disciple?" her laughter almost resembled broken glass, a light titter that scratched against his eardrums and left him feeling remarkably annoyed and angry, "That being said, I do hope he learns some manners," she smoothed out a crease on her suit, which bore no signs of wear despite recent exertion, and walked away, "After all, it would be a shame for dearest

Nui to lose her playmate simply because he couldn't keep his hands to himself."

Clack! Clack! Clack!

"I'm still not convinced this investment will pay off, but I'm willing to give your organization the benefit of the doubt."

Ragyo snapped her fingers, summoning Hououmaru from the shadows in which she'd been observing every moment of their meeting, "As per our arrangement, Revocs shall provide off-the-books funding and support gear," placing one hand on either door, she effortlessly swung them open, exposing an empty hallway bereft of even working security cameras. A benefit of controlling every aspect of the company she'd founded, "Now, if that is all, I'm certain you can leave under your own recognizance," her heel *snap-clacked* against polished marble as she nonchalantly glanced over her shoulder, "Unless you wish to continue this delightful conversation elsewhere?"

Her eyes drifted towards Kurogiri.

But her *question* was directed at Shigaraki.

"I thought so."

Chapter 21

"These hero names will likely be temporary. Odds are, you'll figure out something better. Or the media might run with a different name. Regardless, take them seriously or - "

"What you pick today could be your code name for *life*," strutting into the room, Midnight sensually sighed, "You better be careful or you'll be stuck with something utterly indecent."

Half the class was instantaneously infatuated with the adult-rated heroine.

The *male* half, Ryuko realized, her eyes immediately noticing a certain grape-haired pervert's idiotic expression.

"Yeah, she has a point," unfazed by the rampant display of restrained promiscuity before a class of hormonally influenced adolescents, including one Minoru Mineta, who he'd subtly warned to reign in his behavior, Aizawa ignored Midnight brushing against his forearm with fingers smoother than nature intended, "Names are important. They help reinforce your image and shows what sort of hero you want to be in the future. A code name tells people exactly what you represent," memories of his own name's origin surfaced much to his old shame, "Since this really isn't my forte, Midnight has final approval on your names. She'll walk you through the process."

In the middle of describing how important a hero name was, he ducked beneath the lectern.

"But before I hand things off to her, one small piece of advice - try thinking outside the box," damn, the old lady must've gone completely overboard to leave him this exhausted this early in the morning, "Take All Might, for example. On its own it doesn't mean much, but due to his actions, it's a name everybody in the world recognizes."

With a familiar sleeping bag tucked underneath his arm, he waved goodbye, then walked five feet to the right and slouched against the wall.

"Alright," now the only conscious pro hero in the classroom, Midnight slammed a stack of white boards on the lectern, "Let's get started!"

Ryuko panicked.

She kept up a façade of boredom. The expression everyone thought was her default mood. She grabbed the stack of white boards from Tsu, took one for herself and handed the last over her shoulder to Uraraka. But on the inside, her heart was pounding.

A name.

She had to come up with a hero name!?

The corner of her mouth twitched as she stared at the white board mocking her with its complete absence of anything. Ignoring the cold fingers of dread squeezing her heart, Ryuko gathered everything together and took a deep breath. She could do this. It wasn't any harder than pretending to give two shits about a hero's accomplishments whenever dad invited them over. She just needed to write something good enough to get Midnight's seal of approval. And then move on with her life. But that was easier said than done. Because she had literally no idea what she was going to call herself. It seemed so damn stupid. And yet, holding the marker above the board, its tip convulsing thanks to her twitching fingers, her foot rapidly bounced against the floor.

What kind of hero did she want to *be* ?

My Bloody Academia

"Now then, if nobody else has any more hypothetical questions concerning merchandising rights..."

Aizawa directed his ire at Kirishima, who wisely refrained from any further comments on the subject, before clicking the remote, "... here are the totals for those of you who got offers."

Shoto Todoroki: 4123

Katsuki Bakugo: 3556

Ryuko Matoi: 1912

Ochako Uraraka: 513

Fumikage Tokoyomi: 360

Tenya Ida: 229

Denki Kaminari: 190

Mina Ashida: 101

Momo Yaoyorozu : 95

Eijiro Kirishima: 87

Tsuyu Asui : 61

"In past years, it's been more spread out," mildly inconvenienced by the projector shining directly into his eyes, Aizawa took a small step backwards, "But, as you can see, there's quite the gap this time."

"Gah!" Kaminari felt the exact moment his confidence and future as a pro hero shattered - right when he saw how many offers Bakugo and Todoroki received, "That's no fair!"

"There must have been some sort of clerical mistake," baffled by his own omission from the list of top contenders, Aoyama mumbled,

"What about the real star, moi?"

Her grin matched only by how hard she was punching the air, Mina laughed as an enormous weight lifted from her shoulders, "Woo-hoo! Triple digits for me!"

"Wow, Todoroki got the most?" Jiro looked over her shoulder at Todoroki, who hadn't reacted to his accomplishment, then turned around to Bakugo, "Ahead of Bakugo?"

"Yeah, it's the opposite of how they placed in the festival," resisting the urge to ask another question, Kirishima leaned backwards in his seat, "Then again, their fight was pretty manly and epic. Could have really gone either way."

"I bet the heroes who watched the festival weren't thrilled about the guy who had to be chained up like a rabid dog," Sero chimed in, pointing at the short-tempered blonde explosion bomber only a few seats in front of him.

"IF I SCARED A PRO, THEY'RE JUST WEAK!"

"That's amazing," Momo tipped a curled finger against her bottom lip. She knew she should be grateful to have received any offers. Her performance against Bakugo in the first round had been utterly abysmal, "Guess I should count myself fortunate some heroes believe in me," forcing a shy and tired smile, she offered her gratitude to Todoroki, "You must be proud."

Said student's mismatched eyes conveyed little emotion.

He knew why he received so many offers.

It was the same reason Matoi received the third-most offers despite boycotting the sports festival, "These offers are probably because of my father."

"C-Can you believe it?" sputtering out tears of joy, Uraraka grabbed a somewhat surprised Ryuko's shoulders and began violently shaking her, "Look at how many people want me!"

"Hold on!"

Kaminari's voice nearly cracked at the third name on the list, "Matoi got third!? She didn't even place in the first event!"

"Yeah, but she fought that third-year student," Jiro pointed out, "Remember when we returned to the stadium? The second event had to be delayed because UA wasn't finished fixing the damage from their fight."

Adding his own comment, Tokoyomi's voice pierced through the silent darkness, "That was one intense confrontation."

"Heck yeah, it was!" swiveling in her chair, Mina mimicked several of the moves she'd seen on television, "Mom and I watched the whole thing that night!"

"Man, you took some seriously hardcore blows from that guy," Kirishima's smirk bordered on a grimace as Uraraka stopped shaking Ryuko, allowing her head to finally stop rattling.

"No kidding," Sero whistled, "I can't be the only one thinking Matoi could have probably won the festival if she actually wanted, right?"

"SHUT UP, DAMN IT! NOBODY CARES ABOUT A COWARD LIKE HER!"

Alright.

She'd had just about enough of this.

"Hey, question," raising her hand into the air, Ryuko prepared herself for the shitstorm she was about to unleash, "Can I just, you know, ignore these offers?"

"Say what!?"

The collective astonishment left her ears momentarily ringing.

Mineta, for everything that he was, was shocked, "But you, like got so many offers!"

"Yeah, Ryu," Tsuyu added, "Why do you want to give them away?"

Two days of thinking. Two days of forgetting about that freaky pervert luring her to the park with his glowing nipples and handing her an old book. She'd spend most of her time just walking around Musutafu. Or reading. Or doing anything not involving heroics. And she'd come to a basic conclusion. Pretty much the only possible conclusion. She hated it. She felt stupid. But it was the damn truth.

She'd been acting like an antisocial bitch.

"Isn't it obvious? I don't deserve them."

Oh, great, now even Aizawa was glaring at her.

"And it ain't because of my dad or some stupid excuse," she felt Todoroki looking at her, but for the brief moment her eyes snapped towards him, he was preoccupied with something on his desk, "I fought Togata because I wanted to kick his ass. Not to help anyone beat the obstacle course. Which was selfish, literally the opposite of being a hero," blowing a strand of hair off her forehead, Ryuko jabbed her thumb towards Midoriya, "That's why I want to give my offers to people who deserves them. Like Izuku or Kirishima. Or heck, even Bakugo."

"You've really put some thought into this, haven't you?"

Aizawa's hair calmed down as he clicked the remote, ending the presentation, "Unfortunately, scouting offers aren't like trading cards. You can't pick and choose the ones you receive or give away those you don't want. Even if you feel you honestly don't deserve a reward,

there's no going back. Sorry. I'm afraid you'll just have to choose one."

My Bloody Academia

"Hmm... let's see now..."

As Uraraka walked back to her desk with a noticeable spring in her step, Midnight looked at the clock, "To be honest, choosing names is going a lot faster than I thought it would," to think it would be nearly done so quickly. There were usually at least five or six kids like Bakugo coming up with frightening or indecent hero names. But so far, only Bakugo and Ashido required modest adjustments, "The only ones who still need to present are Bakugo - "

"GIVE ME A MINUTE!"

" - Ida and Matoi," ignoring said student's outburst as he scribbled, erased and re-scribbled something on his white board, Midnight cupped her chin, "Oh, yes, and Midoriya. Are any of you ready to show us your hero identities? I promise not to be *too* harsh."

Ryuko stared at her hand-written scribbles.

Really stared at it.

This was the best she'd managed to come up with.

"Yeah, I'm ready."

She really wasn't ready. Not by a long shot. But slouching out of her seat and walking to the front of the room, she decided to cut her losses and pull the bandage off quickly.

"Alright, so I ain't too good with picking names," propped the white board on top of the lectern, her voice was utterly flat as she realized

it was backwards, spun it around and began from scratch, "But here goes - just call me the Bloody Hero - Senketsu."

(SENKETSU)

"Senketsu?" Momo's head tilted several degrees rightward, "Doesn't that mean 'fresh blood?'"

"Well, Ryuko's Quirk *is* all about blood," Jiro countered, "So, it makes sense."

"I like it!" beamish about the name, Midnight gave an ecstatic thumbs up, "Direct and to the point! But change Bloody to something less, well, bloody. Oh, how about Sanguine?"

Only *slightly* relieved by the positive reactions and compliments, plus Bakugo's irritation at being able to use blood in her name while he couldn't, Ryuko nevertheless pretended she couldn't care less, "Isn't that literally the same thing?"

"Yes, but to the public, it's much fancier and mysterious," Midnight helpfully pointed out, "Plus, Vlad King kind of already called dibs on your original epithet."

She would have argued.

If she cared.

Which she didn't.

Mercifully.

So, she just shrugged, accepted the change and walked back to her desk.

God, being a hero was a shit ton of work.

The first class wasn't even over and already she couldn't *wait* for the day to end.

Chapter 22

The second half of the week had been predictably boring.

She'd handed Aizawa her first, second, third, fourth and so on choices for internship.

Bakugo was refusing to talk to her.

All Might had absolutely nothing on Couturier, not that she expected anything from the guy.

And she'd managed to get about fifty pages into the pervert's book, which wasn't half-bad, only a little dry and the humor hit-or-miss.

Now it was Saturday.

A very rainy, cold and dreary Saturday afternoon.

All in all, she was really looking forward to spending Sunday doing the one thing she couldn't at UA - *sleeping* .

"Alright, I give up, who'd you pick?"

"Well, there were a couple of heroes, but after thinking about it, I went with the pro hero Selkie as my first choice," wrapped in waterproof jacket underneath an umbrella embroidered with frogs and toads, Tsuyu tipped a finger against her chin, "Since he works with the coast guard, I'm bound to get a lot of first-hand experience with aquatic missions. Plus, it would be nice meeting someone with a similar Quirk to my own. What about you, Ryu?"

"As if you even need to ask."

Water trickled down the contours of her umbrella, dripping onto her sleeves as she stepped over a particularly nasty puddle in the middle of the sidewalk, "That rabbit hero in Tokyo."

"I've heard of her," an inch of slimy tongue poked between Tsuyu's lips, "But doesn't she work alone?"

"Yup," Ryuko agreed as thunder smashed through the dreary clouds hanging over the city, "But she's strong as hell," that wasn't an understatement. Mirko was strong. A lot stronger than her, at least. It wasn't something she liked admitted. Or even remembering. But getting face-slammed into the ground without even realizing somebody had yanked her off that cocky bitch with the magical hammers, flipped her counterclockwise, pinched both of her arms against her back and used her ass as a footrest wasn't something she could just easily forget.

"Nice moves, kid, I'm almost impressed!"

"The way I figure," with that cocky voice stuck inside her head, Ryuko snorted, "If I have to do this, might as well work for someone who could teach me a thing or two."

To the average idiot, Tsu's vacant expression looked off.

But she knew her friend better than some asshole off the street.

"You know, Ryu, I'm surprised you're taking this so well," which meant whenever Tsuyu finally spoke her mind, it was usually direct and to the point, "I guess missing out on the sports festival helped put things in perspective. That, or you're looking for a free one-week vacation from class. Knowing you, it's probably both."

"Yeah, well," she ignored that not because it was wrong, but because it made a lot more sense than it should have. Instead, with a reasonably obnoxious grumble anyone other than Tsu wouldn't catch as trying to deflect the conversation elsewhere, Ryuko clicked her tongue against her teeth and loudly scoffed, "Gotta make the best of what you got, right?"

"MATOI! ASUI!"

They heard Ida's awkward running long before he'd sprinted into view.

"Oh, hey, Ida," turning around, which coincided with a blast of cold air to her face, Tsuyu blinked, "What's the hurry?"

"Geez, calm down," her free hand tucked into her jacket, Ryuko was mildly disappointed when Ida didn't slip and fall on a patch of water, "It's the weekend."

"Nonsense!" running in place, which just so happened to be in a puddle, Ida chopped the air with his hand, "As class representative, it's my duty to ensure everybody gets home safe and sound!"

"Safe and sound, huh?" she blew a strand of wet hair off her nose, "You also planning on walking me home? Or maybe you want to tuck me into bed while you're at it?"

"Please keep your humor to an appropriate level of maturity," covered head to foot in rain gear, it was hard to tell if their class rep was annoyed, but from Ida's insistence on moving onto whatever made him sprint down the hill, it seemed she'd hit the nail on the head, "In any case, I'm glad to have found you, Mato," glasses streaked with water, Ida cleared his throat, which was the first sign in hindsight that something was bothering him, "If it's not too much trouble, can I speak with you in private?"

"In private?"

A large dollop of water dripped onto her jacket as she stared at Ida like he'd learned to breath fire, "This ain't some weird plan to ask me out, is it?"

"Nothing of the sort!" he sounded annoyed by her comeback, but it was almost forced, "I simply wish to talk with you in private. Nothing more!"

She should have said no.

She normally would have said no.

She *should* have told Ida to shove it.

Yeah, yeah," as the rain lightened to a drizzle, she shrugged to Tsu, "I'll catch up."

"See you around, Ryu," waving goodbye as only she could, Tsuyu walked away, "You too, Ida."

"Farewell, Asui!"

While Ida said his farewells, Ryuko waited until Tsu was out of earshot, which, thanks to her Quirk, was a lot farther than most people believed. Interesting fact - frogs have amazingly good hearing. Not a lot of people knew that. And that little piece of information was why whispering around Tsu was pointless.

"Alright," she gave her friend another thirty seconds before propping the rain-soaked umbrella against her shoulder, "What's up?"

His hesitation should have been her first clue something was wrong.

"I know this might sound somewhat out of place, so forgive me if I accidentally touch a raw nerve," that was the second warning sign. A really big red flag. People didn't say that and give good news, "But the villain who killed your father," the rain fell a little harder as Ida chose his words very carefully, "You despise them with every fiber of your being, correct?"

Ryuko *seriously* didn't like where he was going.

"Uh, yeah?" she scoffed under her breath, hoping beyond a reasonable doubt he'd drop the subject and move on.

"And you would do anything to make them pay for their crimes?"

But he wasn't finished.

And her interest in the conversation immediately nosedived, "Are you going somewhere with this?"

Ida's silence spoke volumes.

And then he actually opened his mouth.

"During the sports festival, my brother - Ingenium - was injured by a villain," Ryuko felt her annoyance not so much wash away as suffocate underneath a deluge of emotions as Ida talked, "The hero killer Stain."

"Oh, him," unable to fold her arms in protest, she instead shifted her weight onto one foot, her entire posture straightening. She knew who Stain was. Not personally. Just enough to know he was dangerous, "Dad worked his case a while back. The police force couldn't figure out how the hell his Quirk worked."

"Yes... him," Ida chewed his lip, indecisive about whether her knowledge was harmful or helpful, "My brother attempted to apprehend him. But even knowing how the villain's Quirk worked wasn't enough. The doctors..." despite the rain pouring around them, trickling down her back and leaving her shivering, Ryuko heard Ida's voice crack, "Because of Stain, my brother won't ever be able to walk again. His career as a hero is over."

She hadn't noticed at the time, but Ida's hands were trembling.

"I suppose that's the reason I wanted to speak with you," there was a certain sharpness to Ida's voice. Something she honestly never expected from the guy who went out of his way ensuring nobody cut in line during lunch on pizza day, "Midoriya or Uraraka would probably apologize or pretend to understand. Or, more likely, say I wasn't thinking straight. You're the only person in our class... in the hero program... who remotely understands what I'm feeling right now."

Her already plummeting interest in the conversation punched through the ground and straight to the earth's core.

"Don't give me that garbage," her cheap umbrella from the convenience store down the street from her apartment - aluminum and plastic - groaned between her fingers, "You just want me to tell you that hunting Stain is 'heroic' and 'justice.'"

To his credit, Ida didn't attempt to deny it.

"Tch, I thought so," she refrained from explaining herself any further, "You're already itching to go after Stain. Nothing I say will change your mind."

Ida glanced aside in shame, "If I didn't think your opinion wasn't important, Matoi, I wouldn't have asked for it."

Her eyebrow twitched at his bullshit.

"What the hell do you want me to say?"

Now she was annoyed. Genuinely annoyed. And it must have shown on her face because suddenly she was frowning, "That, yeah, I think you should become a vigilante, drop out of UA and hunt down Stain?" it would be one thing if Ida *said* he wanted to avenge his brother. But beating around the bush, saying everything except the only thing that was important, got on her nerves, "You've already made up your mind. You just want an excuse so you don't have to feel bad about breaking every rule of heroics! And what better excuse than the girl who lost her father to a villain saying you're doing the right thing!?"

"I don't *want* an excuse."

Ida angrily emphasized his disdain - at himself, at Stain and at being unable to stand at his brother's side, "I just... you've confronted the villain who took your father. You've had the chance to make them pay. I want to know... did doing so make you feel better?"

The rain fell a little harder around them.

They were the only ones on the path leading away from UA.

Everybody else was either home, studying in the library or training.

"You want to know how I *feel* ?"

She didn't bother letting him answer the question, "Not a day goes by where I don't want to smash her face into a bloody smear. Beating her didn't make me feel any better. It made me feel *worse*," a trickle of blood oozed through her skin. Not a lot, but enough to caress her fingers before vanishing, "And for the record, because you just *had* to say it - we're NOT the same. I lost my dad. He's never coming back. But you still have your brother. You can call him and tell him about your day. Or complain about how life's not fair. No matter what happens to that blonde psycho, I'll never be able to talk to my dad *again* ."

By the time she finished, Ida looked like she'd punched him in the stomach.

Which sucked, because actually punching him in the stomach would have made her feel better.

"So, you know what? Do whatever. See if I give a crap. But at least be honest with yourself," her mood completely ruined and wanting nothing more than to go home, take a shower and veg for a couple of hours, she turned around and walked away, "Don't spout some bullshit excuse about bringing Stain to justice. Just say you want to kick his psycho ass because he hurt your brother."

In the days that followed, after the dust settled in Hosu and Tokyo, she'd look back on that moment and realize just how badly she'd screwed up.

But at the time, all she'd cared about was getting out of the pouring rain.

Chapter 23

"Now arriving at Nexus Station, Corusco Ward - Platform F. Please disembark in an orderly fashion. Now arriving at - "

As the robotic voice repeated itself, the automated doors slid open with a pressurized hiss.

Costume in one hand and backpack slung over her shoulder, Ryuko stepped off the train onto the surprisingly clean platform, yawning only after her sneakers touched concrete. Eyes sweeping the crowd, she spotted several pros handing out autographs or posing or small children. There were also *tons* of advertisements for Revocs products. She didn't know who needed jackets impervious to spikes, acid or steel. Or special goggles for those with sensitive ocular Quirks. And she didn't care. Even after learning her dad had worked at Revocs for who knows how many years, her interest stood below caring about Bakugo's opinion.

In other words - zero.

Basically zero.

"Where's the exit?"

There were signs *everywhere* .

Some of which led back to themselves. Take this escalator to reach Platform A. Head west to speak to customer service. Follow the blue signs to reach the cafeteria. If you've witnessed unauthorized Quirk usage, please head towards the security kiosk. Simply thinking about the signs gave her a headache so instead of doing that, she did the logical thing - follow the crowd. It involved an excessive amount of pushing and shoving, mostly on her head, but eventually Nexus Station's sterile air conditioning gave way to humid spring morning hinting at last night's thunderstorms.

Despite being *the* support gear capital of the country, this was the first time she'd actually stepped foot in Corusco Ward.

And the first thing she noticed - the only thing she *could* notice - upon stepping outside Nexus Station was Revocs. The place had to be seven or eight blocks away and yet it was just *there* . An overwhelming behemoth of steel and glass dwarfing every other building in the city. Backpack slung over her shoulder, her eyes ascended floor by floor, eventually reaching the uppermost levels, where a familiar red symbol stood attached to the curved roof.

Pulling out a crumpled pile of papers, Ryuko searched for the address, memorized it, stuffed it back into her backpack and proceeded in a direction generally known as west.

She didn't know *how* long she'd been walking, but from how much the sun moved, it must've been pretty damn far.

But after what felt like - and had to be - an eternity of walking, backtracking and begrudgingly asking a pro hero for directions, offices and fancy restaurants, plus more than enough stores to bankrupt even Yaoyorozu, eventually gave way to apartments and sidewalks lined with blossoming trees.

Which was where she found herself standing.

Underneath one such tree, shadows and shafts of sunlight dancing across her unkempt hair, a single fly incessantly buzzing around her face and a gentle spring breeze preventing her from sweating, Ryuko stared at an off-white apartment, blinking ever-so-slowly with bored confusion, "This can't be the right place."

Scratching the side of her head, she pulled out the increasingly crumpled and torn pages, found the address and stared at the numbers next to the door.

Yup, this was the right address.

Which only added to her confusion.

She'd expected... well, she didn't know what she'd expected to find, just not a really nice apartment with a vegetable garden around the back. A garden that, when she cautiously took a look, had a sign threatening harm to anyone who so much as touched a carrot.

"Guess this really is the place."

A sigh escaped her lips as she stood in front of the building mocking her with its mere presence, "Better get this over with."

Even though she said it, Ryuko didn't move. At least, not for a minute or so. Because once she rang the buzzer, there was no going back. No turning around, taking the first train back to Musutafu and pretending she interned for the entire week. Well, she *could* do that. But dealing with Aizawa's 'disappointment' and expulsion from UA wasn't something she really wanted. Plus, her arm was growing tired. So, with a troubled grunt, she swatted the fly buzzing around her face, braced herself for whatever was coming, walked up to the door and pressed the buzzer with her elbow and waited.

Nobody answered.

She hit the buzzer again.

And again, nobody answered the door.

Ryuko felt the exact moment something inside her mind snapped. But instead of physically demonstrating her Quirk on Mirko's front door, she dropped her costume, case and all, pulled out her phone and dialed a very specific number.

"Hey, you've reached Rumi Usagiyama! If you're calling about an autograph, get lost. If you're looking to form a team, go bother someone else!"

"God damn it."

Staring at her phone with a single twitching eyebrow, watching the call time increase second by second, Ryuko slammed her thumb against the screen. She mentally willed the rabbit hero to call back. But nothing happened. And when nothing continued happened, she suddenly felt goddamn stupid. Why had she expected anything different? Mirko was a pro. And *that* meant she was out patrolling for crime, kicking ass or posing for the cameras like nine out of ten heroes. She took a deep, rattling breath, burying her anger down in the depths of her soul. Alright. Change of plans. Mirko had to come home eventually. All she needed to do was sit under a tree and *wait* for the hero to finish patrolling, even if that took all day.

Her plan lasted all of ten seconds.

"Tch, screw this," excessively *bored* and patience having long since worn thin, Ryuko grabbed her things and headed back the way she'd come, "I'm getting some lunch."

My Bloody Academia

Somewhere Across Corusco Ward

It was supposed to be an easy score.

The boss's contact claimed security around the armored transport would be lighter than normal.

"Damn it!"

One of the masked thieves instinctively ducked underneath the storm of bullets before returning fire, metal-like nails blasting out of his barrel-like fingers, "This is all your fault!"

"My fault!?" another thug, crouched next to the first in the back of their getaway car, blood trickling from a bullet wound in his shoulder, painfully tossed several small orbs over the side, "Fuck you!" the

spheres bounced once, then twice and then exploded into waves of liquid cement, dragging both the pursuing cops and any unfortunate civilians and pro heroes into the sticky explosion, "You weren't supposed to shoot the goddamn driver until he gave us what we wanted!"

"Will you idiots shut the fuck up!"

The third criminal yanked the steering wheel, smashing their car into a bus, then a minivan and finally a taxi before glancing at their prize bouncing in the passenger's seat - a metallic case covered in yellow tape bearing Revocs' logo.

Something worth more than its weight in gold.

My Bloody Academia

It hadn't taken long to find a place that sold Takoyaki without vacuuming every yen from her pocket.

The chef recognizing her from the sports festival probably helped, whether she liked it or not.

Or maybe it was threatening the manager when she caught him ogling her ass.

Whatever motivated the steep discount, Ryuko walked through the quieter parts of Corusco Ward, lunch carefully perched on one hand and her costume ready to break some would-be thief's nose before her Quirk finished the job firmly grasped in the other. Cheeks stuffed full of fried octopus, she looked around, searching for *something* to do. Anything to pass the time. Because this was going to take a while. The only problem being she didn't know what to do. Or if there were anything she could do. But as her feet continued moving without conscious input, something caught her eye. She backpedaled, nearly bumping into someone. She chewed slowly and

carefully, halfheartedly giving the finger to whoever was insulting her, staring at the movie theater playing pretty much every blockbuster imaginable.

A movie would be good.

Hell, two or three movies would be better.

And by the time she'd gotten sick of butter, popcorn and soda, Mirko would be finished patrolling.

Hopefully.

Her plans were interrupted when a bullet-riddled car skidded around the corner, slammed into a parked taxi, pulled a sharp turn, accelerated fast enough to fill her nose with burning rubber and vanished in a cloud of acrid smoke and exhaust. And she wouldn't have normally cared if not for one thing - the accompanying gust knocking the rest of her Takoyaki onto the ground. Her eyebrow twitched. She took a deep, staggered breath. And as her head steadily and with noticeable creaking snapped towards the car speeding through one red light after another, a tanned and white blur with distinctive rabbit ears bounded from building to building after them.

"Tch!"

Eyes narrowed and hair imperceptibly glowing with an incredibly faint crimson light, Ryuko buried her dark and disturbing thoughts, threw away her trash and begrudgingly followed the trail of crime, "...guess I'm not catching a movie, after all."

She walked.

And walked.

And kept walking while underneath her fingers, flowing through capillaries, arteries, veins and even muscles and bones, blood

flowed back and forth. It was a trick she'd been working on for a couple of weeks. Instead of drawing out her blood, manipulate it inside her body. Something Vlad King had encouraged when she came to him with the idea. Right before he started bawling his freaking eyes. But either Mirko was faster than she'd thought or the criminals ran into a few more cars, because halfway through her second exercise, she ran into the standard crowd - people, reporters and even a few lesser-known heroes gathering around the scene of a crime.

"Alright. Out of my way."

She pushed.

She shoved.

And when someone pushed back, she shoved them *harder* with her elbow.

But after squeezing her way through the crowd until reaching the police line, whereupon a cop said she couldn't go any further, Ryuko leaned sideways and noticed several important yet different details. The first was obvious - the car was totaled. And not just totaled, the entire front was caved in, as if a certain hero caught up, spun around and smashed her heel into the engine. The second, equally unsurprising, was said hero standing over the bruised and battered criminals sitting in the middle of the street next to their totaled vehicle. Third, Mirko was holding something undeniably belonging to Revocs.

"Hopefully, it's not too damaged."

One hand propped on her hip and a smirk oozing nothing but confidence, the rabbit hero handed over the stolen prototype while blatantly ignoring the not-so-subtle crater looming behind her feet, "More importantly, is the driver alright?"

"He'll be fine. A few puncture wounds, lucky considering one of the criminal's Quirks," the cop, sweaty and with the head of a snake, adjusted his cap, "He's been transferred to the nearest hospital for observation, but he should make a full recovery," as he spoke, the bloodied and bruised thieves, more injured from their car getting totaled than anything Revocs or the police could do, were shoved into a van, hands shackled and weapons aimed at their backs, "We can take it from here, but you'll still need to come down to the station before the white suits start making a scene."

"Yeah, yeah."

Visibly disinterested in spending time inside a musty station filling out paperwork or dealing with Revocs' supply of superpowered lawyers, Mirko saluted the cop, "I'll hop on by later this evening. Right now, there's something important I need -"

Right eyes spotted a familiar face among the crowd.

"Hey there, Ryuko, long time, no see."

Ryuko didn't know when Mirko hopped over, grabbed her wrist and yanked her through the yellow tape and into the crime scene, "Couldn't help but watch your performance at the UA sports festival. Not bad. Seems like you picked up a thing or two since our little scramble at Seiai."

Everything happened so quickly that she latched onto the last thing that passed through her head.

"I wasn't trying to impress you," standing barely an inch shorter than the number five hero meant Ryuko could not help but get a full view of Mirko's infamously cocky smile.

"Ten against one and you still almost kicked their asses without your Quirk!" the dark-skinned heroine threw her head back and laughed hard enough that several cops turned to see the commotion, "Of course, back in my day, I'd have finished those obnoxious punks

before a hero like me arrived on the scene," jabbing the crescent moon on the front of her white costume, Mirko's smile widened, "But don't tell anyone I said that! Last thing I need is Endeavor preaching about the 'etiquettes of proper heroism' or some stupid nonsense!"

She didn't laugh.

Which was somehow wrong because Mirko smacked her in the shoulder, "Alright, let's see it."

Ryuko had no idea what she was talking about, and she made certain to get that point across when she slapped away Mirko's hand, "See what?"

"A smile oozing with confidence," instead of waiting, the rabbit hero somehow smiled even wider, "A frown like that's not going to make people feel safer."

"Tch," she clicked her tongue against her teeth, "I'd probably smile if you told better jokes."

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" Mirko took the insult, weak as it was, in stride, then slapped her shoulder with enough force that she stumbled, "You know, I had this amazing plan to introduce myself at the train station. A grand reveal by Mirko the Hero! You would have loved it," her smile faltered, "But these low-level schemers got the *brilliant* idea to rob one of Revocs's transport trucks," with a shrug, she propped her hands on her hips, "Gonna guess you got tired of waiting for me to hop on home and caught a movie or something, right? Because that's totally something I'd do."

Ryuko refused to answer that question.

"Anyway, enough talking! Here's the key to my place," Ryuko blinked when a gold key with a crescent moon attached to it was dropped in her hand, "Get changed into your costume and help yourself to my fridge! Once I'm sure those punks aren't getting out anytime soon, we'll hit the streets. Rumor is there's an underground fight club a

couple of kilometers out of town. Thought you and I could investigate, maybe kick some bad guy ass. Sounds like fun, right?"

Interlude 8

He hated being told what to do.

And he *hated* being embarrassed, especially by a two-bit murderer calling himself the hero killer.

"You know what? I'm completely over you. Leave. Drop dead. I don't care which."

Refusing to cradle his bleeding shoulder, infuriated beyond recognition and wanting nothing more than to latch his fingers around Stain's throat until nothing remained except a pile of dust on the floor for Kurogiri to sweep into the trash, Shigaraki turned around, "You're still here? I thought I was the kind of person you hated most."

"I was testing your motives," standing in front of the only entrance into or out of the darkened bar, Stain carefully kept his remaining weapon close to his chest, "People always show their true colors when on the verge of death," he momentarily paused, "It's abnormal but there is desire. A warped sprout of conviction inside of you. How will it bloom in the end, I wonder? Maybe I'll let you grow. If you don't turn out well, I'll take care of you later."

That was bullshit.

"You honestly believe you could get rid of me? *You* ?" his shoulders trembled alongside a haggard chuckle bordering upon a snarl.

In the periphery of his vision, Kurogiri suddenly collapsed forward, elbow crashing onto the bar and breath ragged, "I'm free!"

"Kurogiri," caring nothing about his protector's newfound freedom, he scoffed, "Someone as crazy as this will be nothing but a problem for the league of villains," blood gushed from the wound in his shoulder

as he brushed aside Stain's continued presence in his hideout, "Get him out of here."

"Please reconsider," ignoring his injuries, which bled quite a bit less than his charge's, the teleporter carefully maintained eye contact with the increasingly wary hero killer, "This man will be a great asset if he joins our organization. It might not seem like much, but merely having this conversation counts as a success. I implore you allow Stain to prove himself."

"I don't care," he really didn't care. Perhaps Kurogiri could have changed his mind given enough time. But getting stabbed really put a damper on becoming friends with the legendary hero killer, "Besides, we already have enough crazy. The last thing we need is for *her* to have a new best friend."

"My business here is done. Now, you'll return me to Hosu," a ragged tongue licked the contours of Stain's mouth, "There are still several false heroes I must attend to there."

Shigaraki couldn't believe it.

"Oh, that reminds me."

In all the commotion, he'd forgotten something genuinely important, "You sure do talk tough, but you should consider yourself lucky you weren't actually aiming to kill me."

Something about his tone caused Stain to grimace, "Why is that?"

"I hate her. I truly despise her existence. Given the option between killing her and All Might, I'd choose *her*," Shigaraki's worn fingernails brushed against his neck, scratching at crusty skin, "But she's strong. And fast. And merciless," he laughed. He didn't know why he found it funny, but nevertheless, his mouth stretched into a malevolent smirk impossible to deny as anything but sociopathic amusement when the hero killer tensed, "What's wrong? Did you not notice there was *another* person here the entire time?"

A floorboard creaked behind Stain.

Reacting instinctively, the hero killed ducked underneath the potentially approaching weapon while slashing backwards, dragging his jagged knife across his ambusher's throat.

Only to miss by a country mile.

"Gosh!"

Despite the hero killer's impressive reflexes and years of experience in close quarters hand to hand combat, Nui casually leaned around the approaching attack, sapphire eyes tracking the blade sweeping inches from her nose, "I didn't think you actually cared about little old me," avoiding the subsequent kick to the stomach, knife to the shoulder and Stain's attempt to shatter her jaw, she effortlessly landed on the counter in front of Kurogiri, one leg crossed over the other and chin propped atop her hand, "Now then, should I kill him or what?"

"No."

His fingers dug a little harder into his neck, "I think he gets the point," crimson stained his shirt, matching the dark red splotch growing over his shoulder, "Kurogiri, let him go. I don't care where. Just anywhere but here."

"... as you wish."

Like a good subordinate, Kurogiri did exactly as he was told.

A dark mist obscured his vision.

An impossibly black fog swept across the bar.

He knew the exact moment Kurogiri disappeared with Stain, leaving him alone in their hideout with the one person he despised more than All Might. But he couldn't kill her no matter how much he wanted. And she took every opportunity to mock that fact. It was

annoying. Even if she was technically working for him, she didn't act like it. She did her own thing and nothing he said or threatened her with could change her mind.

"So..." crusty skin sagged underneath Father's outstretched fingers, "... how long were you planning on watching?"

"Worried I'd let that half-baked vigilante kill you?"

Her tone was playful if anything. And her smile. That friendly smile hiding a body count far higher than his own, "If he'd tried anything more than a love tap, you'd be cleaning up the mess on the floor. But who knows how ~badly~ you'd be hurt by the time I stepped in."

His eyebrow twitched.

"You really enjoy pushing my buttons," a finger tapped against the counter, "If it weren't for master, I'd have decayed you into dust long ago."

"Gosh, don't be absurd," and there it was. The mockery. That saccharine pleasantness he despised more than anything in the world, "Unless I ~literally~ let you touch me, you couldn't so much as lay a finger on me," as if to drive her point home, she slid across the counter, breathing on his neck. Even without looking over his shoulder, he could see her smile. A grin that always, without fail, pissed him off, "Anyway, you'll have to watch yourself for the next few days," her voice shifted mid-sentence, ending somewhere near the door, "Someone important dropped by Corusco and it would be impolite to ~not~ show her a good time!"

"Someone important, huh?"

She didn't care about anyone other than herself, master and that strange woman.

He was merely someone she listened to as long as his orders didn't contradict whatever master told her.

"I can't understand why you're so fascinated with Ryuko Matoi," wrinkled eyes stared at the empty space behind the counter, wishing Kurogiri was back, if only to have his annoying babysitter make him something to drink, "She's not particularly strong. Or intelligent. And her Quirk isn't useful," there was silence. A deafening silence, "Wait... you're not still upset she embarrassed you back at UA, are you?"

"You know better than to pry into my personal business..."

A pair of scissors pressed against the small of his back for all of two seconds before she sat down next to him, "I'm not upset. Well, not as much as I used to be," that was a bold-faced lie. If he knew anything about her, it's that she *really* held grudges. Against everyone. Including him. Especially him, "But that's neither here nor there. My feelings don't really matter in the grand scheme," there was something in her tone. He didn't know what. And didn't care, "As much as I hate to admit it, Ryuko got lucky. And underestimating her Quirk wasn't helpful," yet she was smiling, every word prefaced with an expression impossible to differentiate from genuine happiness, "I'm not going to make that mistake again."

She disappeared before his fingers snapped around her wrist.

"Nice try!" mocking his latest attempt, Nui strutted through the door, manicured fingers curled around the frame, "Try not to kick the bucket while I'm gone, alright? Ta-ta!"

Once she was gone - truly gone - he gripped the empty glass on the counter, cracks forming on its clear surface as it slowly decayed into dust.

"I *really* hate her."

Chapter 24

"What?"

She'd first noticed it yesterday, after they'd spent all evening searching for an underground fight club that didn't exist.

And now, at the end of her second day of interning under the rabbit hero, fresh out of the shower and half-starved after spending hours and hours patrolling Corusco Ward, including pretending she gave a shit about random people's problems, dealing with low-life assholes and a single instance of a moron carjacking an old lady in front of them, Ryuko knew there was something 'off.' The only question was what. It was a simple question for a reason. It asked everything that needed to be asked. And then some. But sitting across the table from Mirko - Rumi Usagiyama, she reminded herself with memories of a sore shoulder - in a room too fancy for the same woman who drooled over fast food, she drew the fork dripping with baked chicken into her mouth and repeated her question, "... what?"

"First of all - don't talk with your mouth full," her own plate covered in half-eaten food and fork stabbing a particularly juicy piece of chicken, Rumi watched Ryuko continuously gorge herself with a mixture of disgust, fascination and confusion, "Second - I'm seriously having trouble figuring out where the hell you're putting it all."

So, it was *that* .

"It's my Quirk," stating the blatantly obvious shouldn't have been such a big deal. Quirks were freaky. As in, they had freaky side effects. Some better, some worse. Izuku kept breaking his bones because he was too strong. Aoyama had his stomach issues. And Tsu couldn't stand cold weather. No Quirk was perfect, not even All Might's if his starved appearance was how he actually looked, "I have to eat to keep up my strength."

But as she sunk her teeth into some more chicken, chewed and swallowed, Ryuko found herself forced to explain everything.

Which she hated.

"I'm serious," it was her own fault. She should have known better. Everyone *always* asked the same question whenever they saw her eating after she'd used her Quirk longer than a few minutes. Well, more like half an hour. Or an hour, "Don't give me that look. A Quirk like mine ain't all sunshine. If I use it too long without taking a break, my body starts breaking down muscles and tissue for energy - at least, that's what dad always said. I just get really hungry. Sucks, but hey," the only one who hadn't asked about her voracious appetite was Mako, which was pretty self-explanatory, "It ain't like I'm paying for any of this."

Rolling her eyes and scoffing as she finished telling the same old story for the hundredth time, Ryuko reached towards more food only for the table to tremble.

The hell you aren't!"

Rumi considered herself many things.

A strong and independent heroine who clawed her way to the number five spot purely on her own strength and physical prowess.

The number one rabbit themed hero in the world.

The obsession of dozens, if not hundreds, of fan clubs, which was both flattering and creepy.

But not rich.

When she punched the table, her knuckles didn't so much sting as vibrate, "I couldn't care less about your Quirk!" the impact, bolstered by her lagomorphic physical strength, rattled their plates and sent a knife falling to the floor, "You want to eat as much as All Might, be my

guest! Eat until you burst!" a twitch of her ears signaled the irritation materializing as a snarl matched only by Ryuko's strangely confused nonchalance, "But you're gonna pay for it! Understand!?"

"Huh?"

"Don't 'huh' me," one of Rumi's maroon eyes narrowed more than the other as she jabbed her fork towards Ryuko, bits of vegetables flying through the air and landing on said teen's face, which started twitching, "When I accepted your application, nobody told me you had the appetite of a goddamn dragon! Unless you wanna get kicked to the curb, you're going to start paying for your own food!"

Ryuko glared at Rumi.

Rumi glared *harder* .

"Screw that," she countered that glare by snorting out the side of her mouth, glaring at a random spot on the floor and mentally willing the conversation over, "And why do you even care?" unwilling to let the hero's cheap and underhanded punch slide, Ryuko stabbed her plate. And missed because she hadn't been looking, "UA's paying for everything."

The tanned heroine's bewildered expression shouted a lot louder than mere words.

"... really?" it wasn't so much the realization her mentor for the week hadn't known something so obvious, but Rumi blaming Nezu under her breath that made her seriously consider smashing her head against the table until the pain stopped, "You didn't know?"

Rumi shrugged, which would have been fine if she hadn't almost been sporting an embarrassingly wide smirk, "You expected me to read the fine print?"

And now she really wanted to bash her head against the nearest object, "Oh my god, you're stupid!"

"HA! As if!"

Seemingly taking the insult in stride, Rumi threw her head back and laughed, "You think I bought this apartment with my good looks and feminine charm? Hell no! I goddamn haggled that thieving realtor until he was on the verge of crying!" her chuckling slowed into breathless tittering, "You should have seen the look in his seven eyes when I stopped pretending I didn't understand that legal mumbo jumbo. The guy almost pissed his freaking pants! You ever see a five-hundred-pound Komodo Dragon start having a panic attack? It's almost as hilarious as catching a two-bit schemer in the middle of a crime!"

Several strands of crimson-dyed hair fluttered in front of Ryuko's nose.

But she didn't say anything.

Her sanity depended on nodding, remaining silent and hoping Rumi eventually moved on.

"You know, I wasn't originally planning on doing this. I mean, c'mon. Me? Babysitting a first-year runt who doesn't know the first thing about being a professional hero? Pfft! I'd rather go to the dentist," Rumi rested her cheek on her fingers, sighing softly as a silver bracelet shifted down her arm, "But you?" red eyes snapped towards Ryuko, "You already know how to kick ass and take names. I don't need to hold your hand or tell you what to do. And unlike, well, most of your friends, you're not afraid of getting hurt. Hero work ain't for the weak of heart. You're gonna get hurt. Or bruised. And possibly killed. That too much for you? Find yourself a new line of work and leave the heroics to people like us! Guess what I'm saying is, maybe I was wrong about you."

Ryuko's eyes almost rolled out their sockets.

"That's bullshit," she slouched in her chair, if only to reach more food, "An *hour* ago you were complaining I was holding you back."

"And I meant every word. Hate it? Prove me wrong," more amused she'd been overheard than flustered she'd said anything in the first place, Rumi sat back and grinned, "Oh, I spoke to those cops who arrested that shoplifter you clotheslined early this morning," up at seven, out the door by seven thirty and patrolling by eight. That was her schedule and absolutely nothing on earth could change it, "So, when were you gonna tell me you were working on a new move?"

Ryuko scrapped her fork against her plate, dragging a heaping pile of vegetables, meat and assorted juices and sauces into her mouth, "When hell froze over."

"Something like *that* ain't for standard crimefighting or patrolling," Rumi searched for the right words before giving up, "I'm gonna guess it's for someone special. A villain, perhaps?"

"Gee, you figured it out," the sarcasm in Ryuko's voice was palpable, "You gonna snitch on me?"

"You kidding!?"

The older heroine almost spat out her food, "Do what you wanna do! Get stronger! And unless you want me to kick your ass, you're gonna buckle down and keep practicing that new move until you get it right!" with a vocabulary modestly less vulgar than her own or Bakugo's, Rumi jabbed a thumb against her chest and smirked, "Villains don't sit around on their asses! Why should we? You want to unleash that move against that psycho? Go ahead! But if you want someone to practice it on, how about we hop on out after dinner and train. Just you and me. What do you say?"

It was a good idea.

It sounded really helpful.

But like hell would she admit as much.

"Yeah, whatever," Ryuko shrugged, the not-so-subtle clicking of her tongue against her teeth giving away how she truly felt, "As long as you stop using those stupid rabbit puns."

Clang!

Clang!

Two forks simultaneously struck the last remaining baked chicken breast.

And every drop of goodwill forcibly cultured between Rumi and Ryuko immediately burst into flames.

"Let. Go," punctuating both words for emphasis as her ass slowly lifted off the chair, if only to give her better leverage, Ryuko's eyebrow twitched when Rumi did the same thing.

"Was that an order?" the last five minutes vanished. The camaraderie developed between herself and Ryuko? Volunteering her time to help Ryuko develop her new move? Agreeing that Couturier or whatever the psycho nobody could remember needed to die, and not only die, but die in an embarrassing way? All that was cast to the wayside. Responding towards the half-threat, half-demand by stabbing her fork through the piece of abused chicken until metal clanged against porcelain, Rumi's grin turned vicious, "Because it sounded like you were telling me what to do."

"Guess you *are* smart."

Nothing else needed to be said, yet as she attempted dragging the last piece of chicken onto her plate, Ryuko found herself unable to do so, but with a little elbow grease and a subtle push of her Quirk, she overcame that obstacle only to have her efforts rendered meaningless when Rumi exchanged the fork for her wrist and squeezed.

"You're really trying my patience," the entire table shifted as the rabbit hero bolted to her feet, maroon eyes glaring into darkening cerulean, "So, unless you want to get roundhouse kicked to kingdom come, you'll back off!"

Teetering on the edge of annoyance and irritation, Ryuko lashed out, "For a hero, you ain't very heroic."

She grabbed Rumi's blouse.

Or, at least, she'd been in the process of grabbing the hero's white blouse.

Because halfway through the motion, gravity inverted itself. It was only later, after the dust settled and she had a chance to get her memories in sequential order, that she'd come to realize Rumi had countered her counterattack by launching her across the table and into the adjacent living room. She remembered hitting a wall. And hitting it *hard*. Then a massive headache when she slid downwards and hit her head against the floor. But that was only the physical pain. The emotional and spiritual pain followed when Rumi strutted across the living room, chicken dangling from her fork and a shit-eating grin stretched across her face.

"Nice try, Ryuko," tearing a large bite out of the sought-after prize, Rumi lingered long enough to rub her victory before turning around and walking back to the table, her tail taunting Ryuko every step of the way, "But it'll be a cold day in hell before I let some teenage punk get the better of me."

Chapter 25

The third day of her internship had been boring from start to finish.

Apart from a couple of drunken assholes too stupid - and drunk - to realize hitting on Mirko was a terrible idea, she hadn't seen a single crime. Not one. No purse-snatchings, random fights or villains robbing banks. Ten straight hours of walking the streets, waving to random people after Mirko nudged her ribs and spending fifteen minutes convincing a girl no older than five or six that she wasn't bleeding to death. Which somehow led to Mirko inviting her to an 'awesome' outdoor restaurant in the heart of downtown Corusco whose manager owed the rabbit hero several favors.

"Well, look who decided to hop on by."

Halfway through her hamburger, Ryuko's eyes snapped towards Mirko as the rabbit hero flagged down another hero, "It's been a while, Monsoon. Thought you transferred to Fukuoka for a change of scenery."

The older hero was the quintessential example of a last generation pro - grizzled grey features, wrinkles around his eyes, more than one visible scar and nearly six and a half feet tall.

"Oh, I did," his voice sounded like rocks inside a tumbler, "Just needed to grab a few things from the old office. Not to mention Typhoon would freeze the blood in my veins if I didn't give our old stomping grounds one last patrol for good measure," Monsoon laughed. A deep baritone chuckling that reminded Ryuko of her dad's laughter, "Have to say, I'd expected to find something today, but either criminals finally gave up or today's the most boring day of crimefighting in years."

A pout made its way onto the rabbit hero's face.

"I'm not complaining," the grizzled hero's red and rustic yellow costume stood out in the twilight, "Survive as long as I have and you learn to enjoy boring days like these," Monsoon's laughter drew some unwanted attention before turning towards Ryuko. He stared at her. She stared back. And then he grinned, "Well, what do you know. You got yourself a sidekick."

" *Intern* ."

Mirko's emphasis and underlying threat was impossible to miss, "Managed to snatch her from UA," curling an arm over the back of her chair, crossing her legs while letting one foot bounce, she jabbed a thumb across the table, "Meet my responsibility for the week - Ryuko."

Ryuko took a bite out of her hamburger while blatantly ignoring the rabbit hero.

"Ryuko?" folding his arms, Monsoon looked her over, "You wouldn't happen to be Ryuko *Matoi*, by any chance?" at her silence, which sounded louder than necessary, the older hero rolled a shoulder, "Caught a glimpse of your exhibition match during UA's Sports Festival. Not bad. Of course, that other kid's Quirk was no laughing matter. He really ran laps around you," he laughed again while grabbing one of Mirko's fries, "Personal opinion? I think even All Might would be hard pressed to hit someone who can phase through matter at will."

"That's quitter talk," the sound of her hand slapping the fry out of Monsoon's fingers left the latter wincing, "Anyway, know you're busy patrolling and all, but got time to catch up?"

"I suppose," Monsoon gave his tingling hand another quick shake, "Assuming, of course, you've forgiven me for assisting you during that carjacking early last spring."

"Another word and I'll drive my foot up your ass," a metal-plated boot resembling a rabbit's foot shifted underneath the table.

While the tit-for-tat between the two friends - where they friends, she didn't know or care - Ryuko found her attention slowly drifting towards something far more interesting. Which was pretty much anything other than listening to them talk about old cases, villains and other things that would have been exciting if they weren't told in the most boring way humanly possible. Yawning out the side of her mouth, she propped her chin on her hand, stared onto the street and lazily chewed a lukewarm fry soaked in ketchup. It was a busy Wednesday night. The streets were full. Crime was nonexistent and she was bored half to death. Counting the number of cars passing by the restaurant, if only to keep herself from falling out of her chair and passing out from boredom, Ryuko sighed again.

She didn't know how long Mirko and Monsoon shot the breeze.

And she didn't care.

But at some point, the back of her neck itched.

Followed by a sharp whistling.

She saw its falling reflection in the building across the street, descending fast enough that it must've had a running start. Without bothering to wait and around demand an explanation from whatever it was, Ryuko kicked her foot against the ground. She stood up, flipping her chair over in the process and attempted to clear the area. A familiar chill trickled down her spine as blood gushed through her costume and into her waiting fingers. But she wasn't fast enough.

And then Mirko's foot connected with her stomach, giving her the acceleration required to avoid whatever was falling towards their table.

BOOM!

What that something was, on the other hand, remained to be seen. Forced into an involuntary flight courtesy of Mirko's well-meaning but unexpected kick, she rocketed away from the explosion, hair

whipping back and forth in front of her eyes. She flew for all of five seconds. An agonizingly long and frustrating five seconds before her right heel connected with asphalt. Followed a moment later by her other foot before catching against a new crack in the road. More than one curse escaped her lips. Her arms rotated in opposite directions as momentum slammed her against the side of a recently abandoned delivery truck, its owner fleeing down the street. As she finally stopped and managed to catch her breath, shoulder sore and the taste of copper lingering in her mouth, debris and rubble fell like rain from the darkened skies. Thick clouds of dust clung to the deepening evening.

And there was screaming.

So much screaming she could hardly hear herself think.

"Ugh... shit," one hand holding her stomach and the other keeping a firm grasp on her Quirk, Ryuko breathed, each attempt less painful than the last. But the numbing pain was second to the monstrous creature crouched inside the wide crater that had been their table only a handful of seconds ago, one bulky arm stabbed nearly to the elbow in solid concrete, "You have *got* to be shitting me! Another one of these goddamn freaks!?"

She wasn't the only one wondering that question.

In the opposite end of the street, eyes never shifting away from their unexpected guest, Mirko released Monsoon, allowing the experienced hero to catch his breath.

This was a Nomu.

Maybe.

The rabbit hero couldn't be one hundred percent certain.

It wasn't the same bird-like villain who'd pressured All Might only to be defeated like every other criminal the number one hero faced.

Superficially, at least. But there were too many similarities to ignore. Whatever this monstrous villain was, it wasn't human. That much Rumi was reasonably certain. Charcoal skin bordering on dark blue marred by countless scars and sutures. Exposed brain inside a misshapen skull. Two rows of unblinking eyes embedded in said brain. Cracked bone white claws sharp enough to slice off an arm if she gave them a chance. A snout full of razor-sharp teeth and dripping saliva. Ripped trousers once belonging to a half-decent suit. All on a creature eight feet tall and weighing half a ton minimum.

"That was a close call."

Even in the heat of battle against an unknown villain, Mirko couldn't resist the urge to crack a joke, "Gotta say, if you're trying to catch this rabbit, you're going home empty handed!"

"Electrical Containment!"

He knew Mirko would hate him, but Monsoon didn't care.

At least half a dozen metallic discs no larger than American pennies flew out of his wristbands, reddish electricity coursing through them. Guided by his Quirk and infused with more power than he usually gave them, they *struck* the villain, sticking onto its shoulders, back, head and legs. It looked at him. Unblinking eyes expressing nothing. But slapping his hands together, fingers interlocked, Monsoon activated his Quirk, an electrical prison powerful enough to immobilize even the strongest villains enveloping the dangerous creature. Its arms were drawn against its waist as its legs struggled closer and closer together. Its head tilted backwards while its fanged maw opened and closed. Its entire body quivered and trembled.

And then the villain *flexed*, shattering his technique in a blizzard of electricity and sparks.

"... fuck."

A lesser hero, one lacking experience, would have frozen at some random villain overpowering their strongest technique through sheer physical strength. And for a moment, Monsoon admittedly cursed. But he didn't freeze. His mind was already moving onto the next step. But he was only a man. A hero lacking speed, power or anything other than his Quirk. By the time he attempted to retreat and come up with an alternative plan, the villain's claws were inches from crushing his skull.

If asked, nine times out of ten Ryuko would say she wasn't exactly heroic.

It wasn't a question of standing aside and doing nothing while someone was in trouble.

And it had nothing to do with not caring about saving someone who couldn't save themselves.

She just refused to conform to society's definition of heroism.

She didn't play fair, fight by the rules or announce herself to a villain before attacking. Someone would call that cowardly. Or villainous. As heroes, it was their job to stand in the light and inform the public of what humanity could achieve if given a chance. All Might told her that once. And her dad had said something similar. But those were just words. Meaningless words that didn't stop a villain from killing her dad. If you wanted to be a hero and stand on the shoulders of giants, you had to go out and prove yourself.

"MOVE IT OR LOSE IT, GRAMPS!"

As the Nomu reached towards Monsoon, weird bone shit protruding from the tips of its claws and resembling more of a wolf than before, Ryuko launched herself forward, feet barely touching the ground as the blood clenched between her fingers exploded into a crimson bouquet before recondensing into a thinner yet no less deadly weapon. Nowhere close to as menacing. But it didn't need to be menacing. It only needed to be sharp. Sharper than the sharpest

sword. And sharpness was something her Quirk could accomplish in her sleep.

It took a heartbeat to intercept and catch up with the creature.

Another gasp of existence to realize the Nomu's eyes had swiveled in her direction.

And a third moment to lean around claws sharp enough to slice through space.

Tensing her shoulders as bony digits thicker than her wrist missed slicing off her face by only a couple of incredibly close inches, Ryuko planted one foot on the ground, the resounding *stomp* echoing throughout the street. Her jaw clenched as a faint yet growing vermillion light radiated from the depths of her perpetually disheveled hair. She breathed, a simple act focusing her thoughts. She pivoted, twisting underneath the Nomu's grasp. And as it came back, focusing on her instead of Monsoon, she swung at the closest part of the hideous monstrosity she could reach.

Her Quirk *sliced* into charcoal-colored flesh right below the monster's left knee.

Then *stopped* as something incredibly hard and dense materialized beneath its skin.

"RRRRRAAAAAGGGHHH!"

Ryuko screamed.

She didn't know why she screamed.

She just did.

The Seki Tekko crinkled as she pushed her Quirk far enough that her skin burned.

"GRRRRRAAAAAAAA!"

And with a squelch, her Quirk finished slicing through the Nomu's leg, blood the same color as oil and other disgusting fluids oozing out of the jagged wound.

"NICE MOVE, RYUKO!"

As the Nomu lost its balance, tongue lolling out of its mouth and eyes swiveling randomly in every direction, Mirko sprang into action, "BUT I'LL TAKE IT FROM HERE!"

CRUNCH!

It was a sound impossible to mistake as anything other than the number five pro hero giving her all to defeat a villain. Empowered by her Quirk and further strengthened by exercising until she threw up and then pushing herself further, Mirko bounded over the Nomu's arms, spinning between muscles strong enough to crush her bones. Her fingers latched onto its wrist. And using said extremity as a vault, she flipped forward and *smashed* the top of her foot into its neck. But much like Ryuko, reinforced bones attempted to dissipate the energy.

But it wasn't enough to shatter her confidence.

"HA!"

Mirko hopped backwards, barely landing on her own feet before sliding one leg backwards in a wide counterclockwise arc.

"YOU'RE ONE TOUGH WOLF BASTARD!"

Adrenaline flooded her body.

"BUT I'M TOUGHER!"

In that same breath... in the same motion... Mirko flipped backwards, planting one hand upon cracked asphalt while driving her foot directly into the underside of the Nomu's exposed jaw. There was another crunch as something important broke under the strain.

Of a Quirk unable to handle the sheer physical pressure forced upon it. The bones inside the monster's neck shattered. But Mirko wasn't finished. Not by a long shot. Still kicking the Nomu despite breaking every vertebrae in its neck, she flipped her hands over each other, spun around and drove her *other* foot into its stomach with every ounce of power dwelling inside her body.

KABOOM!

The impact shattered whatever bones remained intact.

Almost one thousand pounds of muscles, ligaments and assorted structures lifted off the ground as the power contained within her kick sent the misshapen monstrosity flipping head over heels at an upwards trajectory away from the street and any innocent bystanders hiding inside buildings.

That didn't make the rabbit hero feel any better.

On the contrary, she felt worse.

Observing with noticeable apprehension as the creature smashed through a billboard, water tower and bounced off the corner of a ten-story building, Mirko landed in a crouch, one foot tingling and the other feeling like she'd repeatedly kicked solid concrete, "Is everyone alright?"

Ryuko clenched then relaxed her fingers, "Yeah, I'm fine."

"I'm getting too old for this," a lifetime of heroism and confronting the lowest scum of the earth finally caught up to Monsoon. He took a moment to catch his breath, the adrenaline spike taking a toll on his struggling ticker before affording Mirko a subtle yet accusatory glare, "Mind explaining what that thing was?"

"It kind of looks like the bird thing All Might punched into the sky," solidified blood morphed into a more comfortable grooved handle as Ryuko curled and twisted her fingers around the makeshift blade,

"Those league freaks called it Nomu or something stupid. Didn't think there were two of them."

Mirko pressed a finger to the radio inside her left ear.

Yet there was no signal.

She tried again, shifting to an emergency bandwidth, with the same results.

A creature resembling the one used by the League of Villains to fight All Might.

A communications blackout in the heart of Corusco.

"Something's blocking our signal," the pieces were adding up, and she didn't like it, "Find some way to contact the Hero Association," glancing in the general direction she'd sent the second Nomu flying, Mirko ignored her screaming instincts to focus on the matter at hand, "Your old agency's a couple of blocks from here, right?" when Monsoon nodded, everything else the hero might have said was ignored, "Think you can get there?"

"Assuming this isn't a country-wide blackout heralding a large-scale attack," the electrical hero grumbled under his breath, "But assuming it's nothing like that, I can be there in under five minutes. And get backup in maybe twenty minutes. You?"

"Like you really need to ask."

Ignoring the comment about backup, Mirko punched one hand against the other, knuckles grinding against the inside of her gloves, "This thing came all this way to see me," a vicious smirk stretched across tanned skin, expressing nothing but the utmost confidence in her ability to take down something tangentially resembling the villain who pressured the world's symbol of peace, "Ryuko, go with Monsoon."

Anyone else would have been frustrated about being sidelined.

Or relieved.

But as Mirko patiently waited for her answer, Ryuko didn't know how she felt. Her fingers trembled despite her best attempts at keeping them under control, but it wasn't from fear or terror. She wasn't scared of the Nomu. And she wasn't eager to prove herself against the monster. Her Quirk might have overpowered whatever strange bone bullshit the bastard had, but so what? Fighting the Nomu, if it was a Nomu and not some cheap knockoff, was at the bottom of her do-to list. She honestly didn't want to fight that thing. Not if she could help it. Yet walking away, even if it were for something as helpful as calling for backup from someone like All Might, didn't feel right. She didn't know why it didn't feel right, just that it left a sour taste inside her mouth.

"Yeah, sure," settling on the least energetic answer possible, Ryuko pretended she gave a shit.

"Hey, don't take this the wrong way."

If Mirko knew how she really felt, the rabbit hero's poker face was unreadable as she hunched forward, muscular thighs quivering and fingers gripping cracked asphalt, "But my intern dying halfway through the week would *seriously* ruin my reputation!"

"You really think you can take that thing down?" it was a question Ryuko didn't want to ask, not because she didn't want to know the answer, but because when she did, the woman who'd spent the last two days bragging about her strength, calling teamwork pointless and being a general pain in the ass huffed, as if insulted she would even ask such a question.

"Of course."

Mirko wasn't smiling. Not anymore, "I figured these league wannabes would start targeting the top pro heroes after All Might

knocked them down a peg," grinding her knuckles upon the sidewalk, wild crimson eyes snapped forward as oxygen and adrenaline flooded taut muscles, "But if I'm the one these league punks are after, bringing this fight elsewhere is the only way to keep innocent people out of harm's way. And a real hero doesn't back down from a fight no matter the odds!"

Ryuko felt like she should have said how stupid that sounded.

But before she could open her mouth and say anything, Mirko kicked off the ground like a fleeing rabbit, bounding from building to building before leaping over the distant rooftops.

"She'll be fine."

Monsoon's blue eyes, marked by several faint scars and a brown hair gathering a dusting of white, crinkled alongside a deepening frown, "Mirko's tougher than she looks."

"Tell me about it," Ryuko didn't need a reminder. Her stomach and memories of the last few days were good enough, "Anyway," dragging her Quirk across the ground before resting it on her shoulder and walking around the older hero, she grunted, "Lead the way."

The grizzled hero said something.

But she couldn't care less as a flash of pink and blonde stole the breath from her lungs.

Ryuko felt time slow to an agonizing crawl. The world itself seemed to freeze in a single moment. One moment, the street behind Monsoon was devoid of life. And the next, a familiar purple blade was arcing towards the hero's neck. She saw the villain floating behind Monsoon, long blonde hair rustling and pink manicured fingers swept backwards over a billowing dress. Acting purely by instinct, she shoved Monsoon aside, pushing the older hero hard

enough that he stumbled off his feet before meeting the descending blade with her own.

CLANG!

"Nice reflexes, Ryuko!"

She wore the same costume right down to the multilayered salmon dress with feathered folds and porcelain mask resembling a rabbit. An *exact* duplicate of the first mask. Unbothered by her sneak attack failing at the last possible moment, or perhaps having expected Ryuko to block her scissor blade from reaching its intended target, Couturier's head tilted slightly rightward, giving her blank features an almost inquisitive expression, "I honestly thought I had him there!"

The sheer condescension and mocking amusement pissed her the hell off, "Screw you!"

"Aw, don't be like that," underneath her mask, Couturier smiled, "So, you ready for round two?"

Chapter 26

Focus.

She needed to stay focused.

She was angry. She had every right to be angry. And if anyone argued otherwise, she'd break their nose and then continue being angry. But Couturier was fast. And strong. And could regrow her arms without blinking. She needed to keep her head planted on her shoulders because Couturier was going to say something to piss her off. Maybe something about her dad. Something designed to get underneath her skin. Anything to make her lose control. That's why she *refused* to think about the bitch any more than necessary. If not to keep one foot out of the grave, because she needed to remain focused to prevent that freaking scissor blade from turning her into a glorified shish kabob, but because not getting angry would seriously annoy the psychopath.

And that was almost as good as beating the shit out of the bitch.

"Tch!"

Her hands clenched the makeshift handle of her Quirk's latest creation as she stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Couturier. Their blades sparked against each other in a brilliant shower of crimson and purple. A bead of sweat trickled down her cheek, followed both another and another. As hairline fractures no thicker than her eyelashes expanded outwards from the point of contact, spreading across the edge of her blade until bits and pieces of hardened blood fell to the street between her boots, Ryuko kept pushing. Because that was really the only thing she could do against someone capable of shattering her creations. Against the *only* person who'd ever been able to damage her creations. She kept pushing. And eventually something slipped against something else.

"Hah... hah... hah..."

The instant she felt her Quirk slide against whatever bullshit material composed Couturier's purple scissor blade, Ryuko moved counterclockwise around the masked villain, retaining eye contact until leaping backwards, "Guess you didn't learn your lesson," it felt rotten simply talking to the insane psychopath, as if pretending to hold a conversation would spread her craziness, "But I'm more than happy to beat your shit in again!"

She snarled at the mocking laughter.

Tittering like broken glass.

And despite repeating 'stay calm' to herself over and over and over, her mind returned to *that* night.

"Is that how you remember it?" the psychopath in the form of a blonde woman absorbed Ryuko's memory of their previous encounter with cheerfulness a parent normally reserved for misbehaving children, "Because I remember you barely holding your own, even with your friend butting his nose where it didn't belong," the purple scissor blade spun around her pinky as each word stabbed deep into Ryuko's subconscious, "I knew UA was the best school in the country, but I didn't know they were ~that~ good," a flick of her wrist allowed the masked villainess to catch her weapon mid-rotation, aim it in her direction and add without missing a beat, "Well, in that case, I suppose this means I don't have to hold back!"

Ryuko *tried* moving out of the way.

But knowing something was coming was different than being able to avoid what was coming.

As soon as the voice in the back of her head said to move, she moved. Only it wasn't nearly fast enough to completely avoid Couturier's bullshit quick movement. Or the scissor blade teleporting across the twenty or so foot gap between them in the blink of an eye.

It was no more than a shallow cut across her arm. Barely a scratch. But thanks to her Quirk, surprise and the pressure of staying alive, blood *spewed* like water from a fire hydrant. It gushed onto the street in thick puddles for all of two seconds before she mentally clamped down on her blood, reducing the geyser to little more than a light trickle.

"That sure is a lot of blood," dainty fingers wriggled around purple metal as Couturier's obnoxiously blank rabbit mask conveyed her curiosity, "Sure you can afford losing that much?"

Ryuko didn't answer.

She just *swung* .

"Hup!"

A counterclockwise pirouette, one arm tucked against her back while the other casually deflecting Ryuko's Quirk in an upwards angle, reduced said teenager's straightforward strategy to nothing but trash. Mid-spin, blonde hair following behind the rest of her body, Couturier hopped backwards when Ryuko swung again. And then a third time, perhaps hoping she'd prove what they said about insanity incorrect. Nevertheless, tittering beneath her mask, thigh-high pink boots skipping past the twin yellow lines in the middle of the street, her lithe muscles flexed before launching her over a minivan right as Ryuko decided to use said vehicle as an outlet for her frustration.

"Now that's not very nice."

When companies claimed their cars could withstand impacts up to one hundred kilometers per hour, they hadn't counted on someone like Ryuko. Stainless steel painted an awkward shade of robin blue rusted along the tire wells parted like water against the Quirk-enhanced semi-liquid crimson blade. Glass shattered and an alarm briefly blared before petering to a tense silence when Ryuko carved through the vehicle's computer.

"But if you're trying to kill ~me~ instead of this poor car," standing behind the destroyed vehicle slowly but steadily realizing it was now two cars instead of only one, Couturier leaned her elbow against the hood and tittered, "You're going to need to be quicker than - "

"Two Million Volt Electrocution!"

Every light within a five-block radius went dark.

Crouched down behind Ryuko, one arthritic knee painfully touching the ground, Monsoon pushed millions of volts of electricity at more than thirty thousand amperes of current into the villain. He didn't hold back. The morons calling themselves the Hero Public Safety Commission would probably be upset with an old pro going straight to killing a villain instead of taking them into custody. But he didn't give a rat's ass what those inexperienced fools thought. Someone like *this* was far too dangerous to be allowed to live.

"Five Million Volt Electrocution!"

The palm of his hand pressed against asphalt, Monsoon reached deep inside and pushed his Quirk beyond its limitations, not stopping even as Couturier's convulsions ceased.

He only stopped when his Quirk eventually short-circuited.

A rare feat in his nearly sixty years of active service.

"Sorry about that," it took a couple of seconds, but as Corusco Ward flickered back to life, Monsoon ignored the overwhelming odor of cooked flesh, a smell he'd recognize until the day some lucky punk with a cheap Quirk managed to finish what several particularly dangerous villains couldn't, "Was waiting for the perfect opportunity to take her out," faint arcs of electrical clung to his fingers as he shook his head and stood up, "So, you two had history, I take it?"

Ryuko heard him talk, but as she stared at Couturier's charred corpse, waiting for the villain to get up, she felt something that wasn't

relief.

"I've been around the block long enough to recognize a dangerous villain when I see one," Monsoon gave his hand a quick flex, clenching and relaxing his fingers, before rubbing his jawline, "The Hero Association prefers to lock the worst of the worst in Tartarus where society doesn't have to think about how many people they've killed. Can't blame them," he'd seen far worse than the so-called League of Villains. He'd seen actual evil. Not with his own eyes, thank God, but a man whose presence was so terrifying nobody in their right minds attempted to bring him to justice, "But there are some villains that don't deserve to spend seventy years in a small cell."

His breathless sigh almost sounded forlorn.

"I'm going to guess she's the one who murdered your father," when Ryuko didn't say anything, merely glanced aside while barely holding her Quirk together, he leaned back, staring at the starry skies, "You don't have to answer. Figured it out the moment you threatened to kill her. That sort of hatred doesn't come from losing a fight," his gravelly voice conveyed a sense of confusion, as if he knew what to say but not if he *should* say it, "Look... Ryuko, you're, what, fourteen? Fifteen? Point is, you have your whole life ahead of you. Even if this psycho was the one who took your father..."

He motioned towards the burnt body.

"... you don't want the weight of her death on your consciousness," the hero slapped Ryuko on the back, dragging her out of her thoughts, "Me, on the other hand? Well, you'd have to get me rather drunk to hear about some of the villains I fought before All Might burst onto the stage."

Ryuko no longer heard him.

Silence pressed on her heart.

A deafening silence screaming into her ears, "... something about this ain't right."

Monsoon paused before he'd finished turning around, "What?"

"I said..." Ryuko bit her lip, each word more strained than the last, "... something about this *ain't right*," repeating herself, she swallowed the lump in her throat, "At UA, she goddamn regrew her arm. It just... just grew back," her heart was pounding. The silence pressed harder and harder against her thoughts until the only thing capable of piercing the tension was Couturier's smoking corpse, tattered clothing clinging to charred and burnt flesh. And the more she looked at it, the more even *that* seemed off.

Like it wasn't real.

A breath hitched in her throat.

She felt something *move* .

And without warning, she planted her hand against Monsoon's chest and *shoved* him moments before a disturbingly familiar purple blade skewered him from back to front.

"Oh darn!"

Floating past the older pro who hadn't noticed her sneak attack until Ryuko literally shoved him out of the way, Couturier's mood shifted between mocking indifference and genuine frustration as she landed where her corpse had been moments ago, "Couldn't have figured it out a few seconds slower, could you?"

"How the..." Monsoon trailed off mid-stumble.

"You know, it's funny," it was subtle. Something impossible to notice unless you knew what you were looking for, "This is how things unfolded last time," despite sounding cheerful, there was no mistaking Couturier's frustration, "You get angry, throw everything

except the kitchen sink at me only for a pathetic nobody with a second-rate Quirk to be the first one to hurt me," emotionless porcelain stared at Ryuko before tilting towards Monsoon, "You don't know how annoying that is!"

CLANG!"

"Huh."

It wasn't confusion at Ryuko managing to move fast enough to intercept her *again* . Or bewilderment that the teenager cared enough about some washed-up nobody to risk her own life. Nope. What caused Couturier to stop dead in her tracks, poised inches above the ground mid-swing, one foot tucked against her thigh and a single arm extended, was the terribly designed blood shield erupting from Ryuko's forearm. A bulwark tough enough to resist her cute attacks without so much as a scratch.

"Gosh, that's new," unable to resist a compliment, Couturier leaned around the crystalline crimson escutcheon and hummed, "Have you been practicing?"

The shield's existence continued for all of one seconds before Ryuko liquefied every drop of blood, reared her head backwards and *bashed* her forehead against Couturier's mask hard enough to crack the ugly-as-shit porcelain.

"Get out of here, gramps!"

Blood gushed from her forehead, stinging her eyes and leaving her face covered in rivers of bright red, "I can handle her!" her Quirk reforged itself into a familiar blade, excess blood floating through the air and back into her body as Couturier dramatically stumbled, "Get help or whatever! Just get out of here before she kills you!"

Monsoon hesitated.

Leaving Ryuko with the villain who murdered her father wasn't something he wanted to do, but the way things were, he'd only get in the way, especially without his Quirk, "I suppose I'll leaving kicking her ass to you. Think you can handle that?"

Ryuko felt something.

Truthfully, she didn't know what she was feeling, so she simply buried the emotions beneath an annoyed grunt, "Why are you still here!?"

As Monsoon finally took her advice and sprinted towards the hills or wherever his former agency was, Ryuko's eyes snapped back towards Couturier when the overly dramatic villain grumbled, somehow sounding both amused and annoyed, "That's going to leave a mark!" said villain was leaning backwards at an impossibly contorted angle, tresses of blonde barely touching the ground, "What do you think, Ryuko?" and then she lurched forward, shoulders quivering and fingers tracing the crack on her mask, "Does it look bad?"

"Like I give a shit!"

Ryuko smashed her Quirk against the ground, the makeshift sword transforming into a hammer halfway through the motion.

Pink boots daintily avoided the explosion of concrete and asphalt.

Lithe limbs concealing superhuman strength carried Couturier between flying pavement and other debris, "You should relax, Ryuko," leaning on her right leg, arms tucked against the small of her back and a smile noticeable despite the mask covering her face, she watched Monsoon flee into the night, aware she could catch up to the old pro without Ryuko able to do anything to stop her yet choosing to let him escape, "Oh, by the way," prefacing the question by pressing a finger to her cheek and turning subtly in the other direction, Couturier hummed, "Aren't you curious?"

A grimace pulled upon Ryuko's bloodied lips as her Quirk reverted to its standard form, "The hell are you blabbing about?"

"Oh, nothing," the porcelain mask concealing Couturier's insanity shifted when a plume of orange yellow exploded in the distance, "Just thought you'd want to know it was me who sent that Nomu after your teacher."

Ryuko's eye snapped towards the explosion.

"Hmm, to be honest, I figured she'd be dead by now. Guess I seriously underestimated her rabbit strength. Or maybe that Nomu was simply too weak," purposely, deliberate, almost as if tempted her to do something, Couturier turned around, staring at the distant fighting with both hands still tucked behind her back, "Still, even if it was too weak, it did its job of separating you. But I sure ~hate~ when things don't go as planned. Maybe I'll go pay her a visit once I'm finished playing with you."

Her sword burned between her fingers.

"I'm going to ask *one more time*," taking a deep breath, then releasing it, Ryuko trembled, "Why did you kill my dad?"

"Don't tell me you're ~still~ focused on that," it was impossible to drown out the bitch's mocking laughter, an insane tittering that ground against her eardrums until it filled her head and left room for nothing else, "Would me confessing bring him back? Hmm, nope! Your dear old daddy's dead! And once I'm finished with you, your friends are next! And I think I'll start with that ugly toad - "

Something inside Ryuko snapped.

Pushing off the ground, neon danced off her sweaty face as she twisted her upper body, one arm crossed over the other and slammed her Quirk into Couturier's waiting sword. Sparks danced in front of her narrowed eyes. A cacophony of light predominantly purple and vermilion. Her ears rang from the impact. Her arms

quivered, muscles burning with exhaustion as she pushed herself beyond the melting point. And then she pushed even harder. And *then*, despite pushing back equally as hard, Couturier slowly slid backwards, gravel spreading around pink boots before they escaped the earth's gravitation pull. Assisted by a supersonic explosion that shattered whatever windows remained intact, the masked sociopath found herself flying backwards at speeds comparable to the train she'd taken to Corusco Ward.

But that wasn't fast enough to keep her from keeping up.

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

She swung a total of three times.

And three times, despite tumbling chaotically in every possible direction through the night, Couturier's purple scissor blade met her Quirk in a shower of blinding sparks.

"Gosh," upside-down relative to the ground, a flash of blonde ducked beneath a crimson blade, "Was it something I said?" salmon billowed in the twilight as she spun clockwise next to Ryuko, meeting the teenager's attacks every step of the way, "Don't tell me ~that~ was what it took to get you fighting seriously!" after nearly five blocks, roughly the point where civilians were still evacuating the ongoing battles, Couturier's right foot regained contact with the ground, followed by her left, "Because if I knew that, I would have threatened your friends a long time ago!"

The side of a building crumpled, glass and concrete ripping themselves apart.

"Almost got me that time!"

No longer caring to parry Ryuko's increasingly wild swings, Couturier began dancing around the dangerous attacks, moving just enough to avoid scraping her skin, "But as I was saying before you so rudely interrupted me..."

Hovering behind Ryuko, floating seemingly upon the air and hues of green and purple dancing across her mask, affording the porcelain an almost menacing aura, Couturier whispered into the frustrated teenager's ear, "... you might as well forget about me telling you anything and focus on the here and now! For example - "

Crimson arced through the night as Ryuko spun around on her back heel and attempted - *attempted*, being the key word - beheading Couturier only to slice through a truck. Reacting more from instinct and experience than knowing something was coming, she flipped her Quirk around and desperately blocked the purple blade from slashing her face. And it worked to a point. Because Couturier was freaking strong. And despite blocking the attack, the superhuman strength behind the swing knocked her down the street and into a parked taxi.

" - you surviving the next five minutes," mirth *oozed* from the masked woman's voice, "Would honestly exceed my expectations!"

Ignoring the new warmth trickling between her eyebrows and down her cheek, Ryuko grabbed either side of the taxi and yanked herself free.

"But how about we make it *one* minute?"

Her heart skipped a beat when Couturier was suddenly *there* .

And she *moved*, scrambling out of the way of the purple instrument of destruction before it sliced through the taxi, street, sidewalk and the front of the building behind them.

Pelted by debris and asphalt kicked up from the weapon pulverizing everything in a straight line ten feet from impact, Ryuko ignored the

warmth trickling down her cheek. She used that blood, merging it with her weapon. She clenched her teeth until her jaw hurt, pushed off the ground, spun counterclockwise underneath Couturier's lazy swing and barely caught the bitch's actual attack. A mid-swing adjustment impossible for a normal person's shoulders and spine yet easily enough something the masked psychopath pulled off with a laziness almost frightening in scope.

Her costume over her hip ripped.

Followed by a spurt of blood almost like rain in the night.

And *pain* .

Staggering backwards, Ryuko resisted the urge to hold her hip or curse or anything unproductive. She gasped, spittle and blood trickling from the corners of her mouth as she matched the blonde's passive giddiness with pure hatred. She could feel her blood boiling. A heat already causing her skin to warm. With a metallic *clink*, gripping blood hard enough that the hardened liquid warped and twisted, she sprinted towards Couturier, covering half a block in the blink of an eye.

It must have been faster than the bitch expected because her knee connected with the latter's stomach

And her following punch sent Couturier's head snapping sideways before her body impacted the ground at an awkward angle.

"You ~are~ stronger!"

The sound of rustling fabric assaulted her ears as Couturier recovered faster than humanly possible. A joint or two cracked. Landing on her feet, only a smudge of dirt on her costume as evidence something happened, the masked woman laughed. And then, in the blink of an eye, returned the favor. Caught off guard, Ryuko felt her Quirk go haywire between pulling blood back into her body or forcing more into her blade. The villain's sheer speed was

almost too fast to see. Every swing carved trenches out of the street. Every parry left her arms feeling like she'd bench-pressed a truck. Blood coated most of her face. Rips opened across her costume. Her right eye was blurry. Her mouth tasted like copper. The Seki Tekko were hot enough to burn her skin.

Yet Ryuko didn't stop.

"But it's not enough to ~kill~ me," the sociopath used their clashing blades to lean close enough to whisper into her ear, "If you want *that*, you're gonna have to try a little harder!"

"Shut up!"

Streaks of crimson followed one final attempt to split Couturier in two before the masked woman hopped backwards and *leapt* several stories into the air.

"For someone who couldn't save her daddy, you're really giving it everything," perched on the edge of a roof, flames from the distant battle between Mirko, the Nomu and the heroes who'd come to help, Couturier propped her chin on her palm, crossed her legs and tittered, "Do you still have nightmares, Ryuko? How often do you dream about stumbling on your dear old daddy gasping for breath? To have such a fun Quirk yet be unable to save the one you love. The guilt must be gnawing on your soul."

"I SAID SHUT UP!"

Screaming until her lungs turned raw, Ryuko leapt onto the bisected truck. Her foot dented weathered steel, rust flaking off green and silver paint as she bent her knees and *jumped* as high as possible. Ten... twenty... and finally sixty feet. She leapt until she stopped. And then she *ran* up the side of the building, arms pumping back and forth, vermilion light radiating from her hair and the distant flames from Mirko's battle illuminating the psychopath's mask's every imperfection and crack. She didn't stop running. Not even when

gravity attempted pulling her back down. She just kept pushing herself higher and higher, spittle and blood tearing out of her mouth.

In a heartbeat, she floated eye level with the insane villain.

And then her spine *crumbled* .

"You really should have asked yourself 'why on earth am I announcing my attack before actually doing it?' before doing anything," lowering her foot, which had the honor of breaking one or two of Ryuko's ribs as it sent her flying across the roof, Couturier watched said teenager crash into an air condition unit before continuing the conversation, "A real hero attacks first and then says what they did. Gee, I would have thought you learned ~something~ at UA."

Silence.

Not even a curse.

"Come on, Ryuko, I don't have all day."

The tapping of Couturier's purple scissor blade against the roof was louder than it should have been, "How long are you planning to -"

Thump!

What could only be called confusion trickled through the villainess's thoughts when something smashed into her stomach, tearing through her salmon dress in the process and leaving a gaping wound. She looked down, mask cocked slightly to the right, staring at the blood oozing from the unexpected wound. A hole no larger than a marble. Or her fingertip. A jagged hole closing as quickly as it appeared, leaving her good as new yet with a costume that needed fixing, "I don't know what you did," prefacing her curiosity at whatever Ryuko did with suitable astonishment, Couturier grabbed her sword with both hands and *split* it into two shorter blades, "But miracles only happen once!"

"A miracle, huh?"

Gasping for breath, Ryuko stumbled onto her feet, collapsed and once again managed to stand, one hand holding onto the fire escape, "So, if I do it again, what's that make you?"

"Interesting question!"

Another explosion shook Corusco as Couturier spun her newfound twin blades, "But if you think I'd actually fall for such a cheap trick," darkness danced across her mask. Shadows of the deepest black caused the porcelain to obtain an almost malevolent sheen in the twilight glow when she spun around and deflected the blood sword Ryuko had dropped moments ago, "Then you've got another thing coming!"

The mentally controlled weapon *shattered* upon impact, dissolving into millions of shards of solidified blood.

"Was that seriously the best - "

For the first time in a really long time - in fact, for the first time in her life - Couturier was at a loss for words. Leaning her shoulder against the fire escape for support, blood covering most of her body, Ryuko was pointing two fingers at her. For a noticeable fraction of time, she wondered what Ryuko was doing. And then her mind pieced together the truth. Bright blue eyes within the shadows of her mask widened. Something ephemerally resembling bewilderment registered on the edges of her consciousness as every drop of blood lifted from Ryuko, flowed through the darkness and condensed into a small orb in front of the battered teenager's trembling fingers.

"... oh."

Her dull astonishment was interrupted when a liter of blood formed into a sphere no larger than a marble smashed through her mask, penetrated her skull and exploded out the back of her head in a bouquet of blossoming crimson.

Chapter 27

"Guh... hah... hah... hah..."

The edges of her vision wavered - an old and familiar side-effect of her Quirk. The Seki Tekko should have fixed that. But then again, Mikisugi or whatever that pervert's actual name was never imagined her coming up with something like blood bullets. Face caked by sweat, dirt and blood oozing from a cut on her forehead, Ryuko didn't know how much blood she had sacrificed.

Sacrificed.

That was a really good word.

"Tch."

She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, swallowed the glob of blood sitting on her tongue and staggered away from the fire escape, fingers trailing against the weathered metal as exhaustion carried her forward.

"Damn it," a dollop of crimson pinched from her thumb only to freeze midair, reverse direction and disappear into her costume. Blood coated her face and neck. Her hair lay matted to her forehead, soaked by the same liquid preventing her from seeing out of her right eye, "I feel like shit," resembling death warmed over and feeling like she'd gone several rounds against All Might without the bastard holding back, Ryuko stumbled her way towards Couturier's headless corpse. Blood was pooling around whatever remained of the former villain's neck. A puddle growing by the second. She stared at the corpse for what felt like longer than forever before slowly and grimly raising her eyes to the taller building across the street.

A real-estate agency judging by the sign above the front.

A building with a crater no less than a foot across at eye-level.

"Ugh."

Less a grunt of acknowledgement and more a wince of embarrassment, Ryuko felt her cheeks turn crimson, "Really need to work on my aim."

For an appreciably long and awkward moment broken by the distant sounds of sirens and helicopters heading towards Rumi's ongoing battle against the Nomu, she didn't say anything else. Holding her shoulder, blood trickling between her fingers yet never dripping down her arm, air exploded from her mouth in a facsimile of an exhausted chuckle, "I *really* feel like freaking shit," there was a lot of blood on the roof. Some of it hers. Actually, most of it was. The rest, however, belonged to Couturier, "But it's better than *her* ."

That she couldn't control so much as a single drop of her blood currently painting the roof vicious shades of red went ignored.

As the distant explosions ceased, leaving a deafening silence pressing against her ears, broken only by her ragged breathing, Ryuko's eyebrow twitched, "She better actually be dead."

Confirming the psycho was dead and not merely faking was the hundred-million-yen question.

It was why she didn't turn around and walk away.

And it was *why* her fingers clenched another sword even as her head was already swimming from sacrificing so much goddamn blood.

It was excruciating. It was torture. And yet she waited for the monster to leap back onto her feet. Maybe she was paranoid, but after the disturbing shit at the USJ, where the blonde psychopath shrugged off a missing arm, regrew said arm in seconds and then taunted Bakugo about his Quirk, nothing was off the table. She felt her heart beating wildly. Her thoughts were filled with nightmares of Couturier pulling a new head out of her ass or popping out of nowhere or

something. Anything. A minute passed. Then another. And a third. All without anything happening. No random twitches or strange movements or anything suggesting Couturier was faking her death. Absolutely nothing happened. And continued not happening even when she stepped closer to the headless corpse.

"She's... dead."

Ryuko couldn't express how *great* saying that felt.

"She's... actually dead..."

It was over.

A dam broke inside her heart as she *laughed* . Her shoulders trembled. Tears shimmered in the corners of her eyes. She choked back a thick sob. And she *laughed* . It was over. Couturier was dead. Tet she didn't feel better. Everything should have gone back to normal after killing the villain who killed her dad. Yet nothing had changed. The realization only drove what she'd been denying for several months deeper into her soul. Nothing was going to change. She wasn't ever going to get back to normal.

The life she remembered... being embarrassed at her dad's jokes, being bored in school and hanging out with Tsu and Habuko... was never coming back.

"Fuck you!"

Snarling out every ounce of hatred simmering inside her heart, Ryuko *kicked* Couturier's corpse, "FUCK YOU, YOU BITCH!"

She kicked the corpse again.

And again.

And again.

Even after *finally* avenging her dad, she wasn't feeling any better.

She only felt empty.

"... *fuck*..."

Her legs gave out. And no longer having the energy or motivation to stand, Ryuko didn't resist, "What now?" a tear trickled down her smudged cheek. Couturier was dead. Was there any point doing anything else? Did she still want to be a hero? The only reason she was at UA was to track down the villain who killed her dad. Because All Might *promised* he would do everything possible to bring Couturier to justice. But now there was nothing keeping her from walking away from everything. She could transfer out of the hero program and figure out something else to do with her life. She could let someone who actually *wanted* to be a hero take her place.

"*You don't want to be a hero?*"

"*Nope!*"

"*Every girl your age wants to be a hero.*"

"*Not me!*"

"*Why?*"

"*Because being a hero is boring! I want to be like you, dad!*"

Did that make her a coward?

"Shit," head tucked against her knees and thoughts converging towards a headache, Ryuko choked back another angry outburst, "What the hell am I going to do!?"

A month ago - goddamn it, a *week* ago - she wouldn't have needed to think about the answer. But finally killing Couturier changed everything. And she didn't know why. Her life was a mess. It had taken months of clawing her way back from that darkness to regain some measure of normalcy. To not *hate* every hero for not protecting her dad. She still remembered that darkness. And now she was

going to throw everything away? Again? She chewed her lower lip until copper filled her mouth with familiar bitterness. She pulled her knees together and cursed at the top of her lungs. What was she going to do with her life? Did she even still have a life? She felt empty. So goddamn empty inside. Like Couturier had sliced everything out of her heart until only hatred and anger remained.

Now that was gone.

Leaving *nothing* inside her chest but emptiness.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't goddamn fair!

She didn't know how much time passed.

And she didn't care.

But at some point after her tears finally dried, Ryuko noticed one of Couturier's purple swords lying within arm's reach. It seemed so strange in the darkness. A weapon a normal hero or villain wouldn't have chosen yet the psycho used like a goddamn master. She didn't know what pushed her to reach towards the weird choice of support gear. Just that she slowly reached out, fingers scraping through the twilight towards the crescent-shaped handle.

STOMP!

The sound of a someone breaking her arm with their foot registered faster than the pain of a someone breaking her *fucking* arm with their foot.

"GGGAAAAAAGGGGGHHHH!"

"Now... Now..."

Ryuko nearly passed out from the pain, voice raw and every nerve in her body screaming. Yet standing on top of her arm, crushing it

beneath an armored pink boot adorned with red bows, Couturier's headless corpse *spoke* in a way that didn't require vocal cords, **"You brought this on yourself for being too strong,"** the voice warbled, echoed and twisted back on itself without repeating as flesh and bone regenerated, **"You wanted me to take you seriously, right?"**

The only thing that *didn't* come back was the creepy rabbit mask.

"And here I am, so why are you complaining?" as the pace of her regeneration erased every trace of Ryuko's attack, leaving unblemished skin and blue eyes surrounded by wrinkles of maniac disappointment, Couturier stomped her boot against the broken arm with a little more emphasis.

"FFFFFFUUUUCCCCCKKKK!"

"Stop screaming," the warble in Couturier's voice disappeared, replaced by an ominous *lack* of emotions as her fingers latched around Ryuko's throat, "And ~don't~ think about passing out. Because if you do..."

Her grip abruptly tightened.

"I'll kill you," pure hatred oozed from the monster guised as a young blonde woman. A miasma of utter sadism as she slowly squeezed her fingers until Ryuko couldn't breathe, "And then I'll kill your friends. Understand?"

"Ggghh... !"

The pain was excruciating.

She could barely think.

But despite the unbearable pain, Ryuko curled two trembling fingers on her still working hand and shot another bullet through Couturier's stomach.

"Gosh, was that supposed to hurt?" *unbothered* by the hole in her stomach surrounded by ragged flesh and tattered clothing, Couturier's smile broadened in response to the surprise slapping Ryuko in the face, "You're only killing yourself, you know. How much blood are you sacrificing every time you shoot me? A liter? Maybe two liters? Oh well, it doesn't really matter, does it?" she raised her arm, dragging the beaten teenager off the roof while her stomach stitched itself shut, "You're just wasting your time."

"Fuck... ghh... fuck you..."

"You sure do have a dirty mouth," if she found the insult hurtful, Couturier's tittering betrayed an inhuman mind, "But cursing won't avenge your dear old daddy. Or maybe you never wanted to avenge him. Maybe this was always about ~you~, Ryuko."

Ryuko spat at the villain, "As... if... you... bitch..."

"Hmm, maybe not!"

And without a single care in the world, Couturier opened her fingers and allowed Ryuko to collapse onto the rooftop, "But if this is seriously the best you can do, I suppose there's no point dragging this out," she'd picked up the purple scissor blade without moving so much as an inch, "I'm getting bored playing with you. So, how about I leave you a present. A little something to remember me by," the distance between herself and Ryuko wasn't any more than four feet. A trifling small distance, but in the darkness, looming over the fallen student with a purple sword shifted from one side of Ryuko's face to the other, Couturier looked taller than Mount Lady.

"Which eye do you want to lose, Ryuko?"

The villain cocked her head sideways as the sword hovered over Ryuko's left eye, "Your left?" and then swung the purple scissor blade a couple of inches to the right, "Or your right?"

A purple thigh-high boot snapped Couturier's neck before she could make the decision for Ryuko.

"Sorry about hopping in at the last second!"

Rumi bounced on one foot as she landed on the rooftop where Couturier had been standing not moments ago, "That Nomu guy was tougher than he looked," the sound of the blonde villain smashing into the emptied building halfway down the block, shattered glasses and assorted debris raining onto abandoned streets, was anything but music to the rabbit hero's long ears, "Had to smash its brains to knock it out," a drop of blood splattered next to her foot. A thin dollop of crimson followed by several more in quick succession from the wound puncturing her shoulder.

An injury the hero didn't seem to notice.

"Gonna wager that was Couturier."

It wasn't so much a question as it was Rumi repeating the only possible explanation, "Huh, thought she'd be taller," deep maroon attempted to pierce the dust and smoke silhouetted against the flames from the Nomu punching into an underground gas line, but it was impossible to see anything besides darkness and distant flashes of blue and red, "What happened to Monsoon?"

The hero's voice tightened.

Something even through the agonizing haze of blood and pain, unable to move without feeling like she was going to throw up and heart pounded inside her chest, Ryuko noticed.

"He's... fine..." laying on her side with her cheek pressed against the filthy roof, bile welling in the back of her throat and squeezing her broken arm, instinctively knowing that wouldn't help but hoping it would help anyway, Ryuko forced open her eyes, "Got... damn it... he got away... earlier..." she couldn't see. There was too much blood covering her face. And all the pain made her Quirk worth less

than bullshit. But she saw Rumi. She saw the tanned heroine's leotard torn around her stomach and chest. Saw the cuts and bruises. Noticed the large hole in her shoulder.

And she laughed.

A desperate, pain-filled chuckle.

"You... ghgh, shit... you look like shit," she forced out the insult, if only to take her mind off the pain.

"What, this little paper cut?" preempting the question she *knew* Ryuko wanted to ask, Rumi patted her shoulder, "Let my guard down like an idiot."

The older hero forced a smile.

"Ryuko..." but try as she might, Rumi couldn't maintain the cheerful façade, "... I'm sorry."

"**Don't** apologize," hatred boiled from the bloodied gap between Ryuko's trembling lips and the red-soaked concrete underneath her face, "I don't want apologies," she didn't blame the hero for anything, "But if you want to apologize," despite being unable to move without *pain* exploding throughout her body, Ryuko forced herself onto an elbow, gasped out an unnatural string of curses and glared at Rumi with eyes teetering on the edge of unconsciousness, "Then **stop her**," blood dribbled from her clenched teeth, a foamy mixture of blood and spittle, "Don't let her get away."

Those were dangerous words.

Those were *incredibly* dangerous words.

But as worrisome as it was hearing the same girl who watched contact sports instead of the latest teledrama, which she didn't necessarily find *wrong*, demand she prioritize vengeance over going to the hospital, Rumi knew Ryuko was right about one thing -

Couturier was a deranged and dangerous villain. There was no questioning that. She didn't know how many lives Couturier stole. Some part of her mind refused to think about the exact number. And another part realized it was a stupid question. The only thing that mattered besides Ryuko going to the hospital was beating Couturier to within an inch of her life before locking the villain inside the deepest, darkest prison and throwing away the key.

And only after she'd personally escorted Couturier to Tartarus would she teach Ryuko the difference between justice and vengeance.

Maybe.

If she bothered remembering.

"Heh... don't need you telling me what to do."

Snorting out the side of her mouth, Rumi punched one hand against the other and grinned, "I was going to kick her ass with or without your permission!"

Chapter 28

"She's not moving."

Less a question and more an observation of the psycho villain's current scheme, Rumi hopped twice as she landed on the building directly across from Couturier's location. The villain was buried underneath rubble, office furniture and computers. A lesser criminal would be unconscious after getting kicked in the neck and smashed head-first into a building. Or even killed. But something told her Couturier was not only alive, but unharmed. It was the only reason she hadn't immediately hopped back onto the offensive. Or made a beeline straight for the villain before she did something horrendous. Her tongue dragged along cracked lips as white hair gently bellowed around her face. Her ears twitched in the silence as her eyes attempted to pierce the thick veil of smoke rising from the building.

Something about Couturier reminded her of that hooded fighter from way back in Osaka in the worst possible way.

"HEY!"

Perched on the edge of the roof, hands propped on her hips and announcing herself loud enough for someone on the streets to hear her overwhelming confidence, Rumi made sure her voice came across loud and clear, "YOU PLAN ON HIDING ALL NIGHT OR WHAT!?" She couldn't care less about what Couturier was hiding underneath that ugly dress or disturbing smile. She planned on getting answers to everything - the name of her little league's boss, the villains she was working with and demanding, in the gentlest possible words, why she'd murdered Professor Matoi and *who* gave her the orders to do so.

"I AIN'T GONNA REPEAT MYSELF!"

The corners of her lips quirked into an overconfident smirk, "COME OUT AND SURRENDER BEFORE I -"

Something moved in the periphery of her vision.

As soon as the blonde blur appeared in the furthest corner of her eye, she leaned forward and *sprinted* down the length of the building. Gravity pulled her downwards but it was only her momentum which carried her forth. Her muscles twitched with each step. Her jaw clenched. Her senses expanded until her mind couldn't process any more information. Maroon eyes narrowed never wavered from the figure attempting to retreat into the darkness. Arms trailed behind her streamlined body as every purposeful stride kicked up clouds of smoke and dust while cracking the glass and steel façade going from vertical to horizontal in the blink of an eye. Pavement and abandoned cars grew closer. She passed signs, billboards and advertisements.

Three-quarters of the way to the ground, close enough to count the number of cell phones left behind in the wake of Couturier's appearance, Rumi *stomped* her foot into the building and pivoted. She snaked fingers blanched lighter shades of brown into concrete and steel. The tips of her gloves wore down until barely a thin layer of fabric separated her fingertips from painfully eroding. And with one final stride, the sole of her foot *pushed* off the building and she *flew* towards the cowardly villain.

"YOU THINK I'LL LET YOU GET AWAY!?"

Her foot smashed into Couturier's ribs with a bone-shattered crack.

KABOOM!

Four blocks away from the battle, near a recently constructed perimeter manned by average heroes and ordinary police officers, something unexpected *smashed* into the asphalt.

"Huh?"

"What the hell was that?"

"Is that a... hero?"

"No! It's a villain!"

"Does anyone have a restraining Quirk?"

"I do! But I have to get closer!"

"Go! We'll cover you!"

With nearly surgical precision, Couturier extracted herself from the pavement. Her fingernails dragged against the road, tearing thin trails without so much as a scratch. Steadily and purposely, breathing slowly through her nose, she shambled onto her feet, an eerie silence accompanying every subtle twitch and movement.

"That was seriously uncalled for."

Heroes were moving towards her location. Quirks were being activated. Footsteps. The crinkling of fabrics and threading on costumes. She heard everything. She could *feel* every last type of fabric. She could see them in the periphery of her vision. That was how she knew, without granting the heroes so much as a modicum of her attention more than they actually deserved, the number of fools eager and willing to sacrifice themselves on the foolish mantle of 'stopping her.' It was pathetic, not that she cared. The only reason Couturier decided to actually *look* at the approaching nobodies was because one of them was attempting to disrupt her sense of balance.

It didn't take her long to single out the guilty party.

A woman, mid-twenties, pinkish-purple hair, green eyes, form-fitting costume predominantly dark blue with purple trimming and covering everything below her neck. The particular choice of costume and support gear wasn't half-bad. But when she raised her hand and

gently clenched her fingers, such thoughts and observations were relegated to the trash. She didn't need to wait long. As always, the process took less than two seconds. Maybe three on a bad day. The woman coughed. Then choked. Then struggled to breath before collapsing as every bone and organ in her body were violently *crushed* .

"Hmm..."

The heroes panicked.

They screamed and shouted, wondering what happened and how their friend died.

Then another four perished the same way.

Couturier lowered her arm, fingers relaxing and lips curled into a subtle yet satisfied smile. As she'd expected, the false confidence instilled into the heroes disappeared, replaced by nervousness and terror. Some of them were shouting for assistance. Others wanted to know what happened to their friend. Most of them, at least. Some refused to retreat, standing their ground on legs made of jelly despite knowing they couldn't beat her. Or perhaps they honestly believed they *could* beat her. The thought made her titter. As insulting as knowing that was, she honestly appreciated their bravery. It made what she was about to do all the more fun.

"... let's see..."

The heroes backpedaled when she turned aside and smiled, "... you ~all~ want to die? Strange, but if you insist - "

An axe kick to the face interrupted her ultimatum.

She flew.

That was only thing Couturier could say, simply that she flew before smashing through the front of an expensive French restaurant.

"Merde."

The foreign curse escaped into the darkness as she staggered to her feet, brushed down her dress, cracked her neck, first to the right and then the left and *smiled* . Unharmmed, utterly unblemished and unimaginably infuriated by the last several minutes, Couturier raised a foot, stepped forward and promptly froze when something warm dribbled down the contours of her face. She blinked, blue eyes crossing. Out of curiosity, she reached up, touched her forehead, smudging whatever was dripping from the ceiling and stared at her coated fingers with something less benevolent than childish fascination coursing through her veins. It was blood. *Her* blood. Dripping down her face. Dripping onto her dress. Dripping from an ugly cut over her eyebrow.

And it *wasn't* healing.

"This is getting dangerous," there wasn't any humor in her voice. No amusement or mockery. Just pure indignation, "She might actually beat me," the unholy confession disappeared into the darkness, "Guess there's no other option. I was saving it for Ryuko, but she's left me no choice."

She could only use this technique once.

And wouldn't be able to use it again for a long time.

One step.

"That's why..."

Two steps.

"... I ~ **really** ~ hate her!"

Three steps.

On the fourth and final step, something launched itself out of the restaurant and back onto the illuminated streets of Corusco Ward.

Bloodied and utterly infuriated at being reduced to such a state by a nameless hero, Couturier made a beeline straight for Rumi and, as she'd expected *met* the annoying rabbit-eared hero before shed taken a single breath of fresh air. They met mid-movement, red glaring at blue, svelte costumes a clash of white and pink. Toned muscles against lithe limbs. Hero against villain. While an inch or so taller than the older hero, the formerly masked villain found herself on the defensive before their battle renewed. The rabbit hero was faster and stronger. And for some reason, capable of following her movements before she even moved. Every time she attempted to grab the hero's costume and *pull*, the annoying woman had already moved somewhere out of reach.

"Gosh, do you know ~how~ much I **hate** you right now?"

She dodged an axe-kick by the skin of her teeth.

"If you're annoyed, then that means I'm doing *something* right!" Rumi bragged from high above, her voice shifting back and forth in the space of a single sentence.

"I've been playing around, you know. Not taking anything seriously. Because there's no reason to take anything seriously," on the ground, unable to track the hero's movements, Couturier sneered, "But I have to take ~you~ seriously. And I **hate** you for making me do that!"

"Oh, boo hoo!"

Rumi couldn't contain how little she gave a shit about that. Schemers, punks, villains, criminals and even vigilantes if you got them drunk enough to talk. Every half-assed idiot with a Quirk bragged about 'holding back' and 'finally taking a fight seriously.' She'd heard every variation of that annoying rant at least a dozen times in the last year, "You think I give two shits about your feelings?" kicking off an advertisement for water or some strange energy drink, she bounded several times, each hop bringing her closer and closer to the street. Her already noticeable smirk

widened. And right when Couturier's eyes snapped towards her exact location, she flipped forward and smashed *both* feet into the villain's stomach.

There was an underwhelming *oomph*.

A quiet *whump* .

Yet Couturier nevertheless managed to snap her arm towards the rabbit hero.

Rumi felt her instincts *scream* .

And without considering *why* she did it, she flung off her glove.

Her heart nearly skipped a beat. Time slowed to a crawl as she watched, eyes wide and breath bated, her glove tear itself apart. And not simply tear itself apart, but shrink to the size of a small marble. Fingers dragging along pavement, leaning sideways with lips pulled back into a frustrated snarl, Rumi jumped straight up, grabbed the edge of an otherwise ordinary window overlooking the street, held still long enough to get a bearing on her surroundings and resumed bounding back and forth. Her feet kicked off concrete and steel, scaring more than a few civilians hunkered inside their offices. A pipe shattered as she kicked off the corner of another building, spilling water - or what Rumi hoped was water and not something she'd be blamed for in the morning. Spiderwebs erupted on floor-length windows. Billboards and signs advertising Revocs products and other luxury goods rained onto the ground in bursts of glass and plastic.

And at the center of everything, hair falling onto her face, Couturier tittered.

"You can't keep this up ~forever~" the blonde's singsong voice pierced the darkness, "It's only a matter of time until I *catch* you."

Rumi didn't listen.

"I DON'T HAVE TO KEEP IT UP FOREVER!"

The public safety commission was going to have a *lot* of questions for her, but with an infuriated grin bordering on determination to succeed at any cost, Rumi kicked backwards and smashed the side of an office. The impact reverberated up her leg. She felt her teeth chatter. Adrenaline flushed her veins. Her ears rang. And as the first chunk of reinforced concrete and steel rebar twisted into inch-thick pretzels erupted in slow motion around her face, followed by everything else, she spun around and axe-kicked the largest piece - one weighing more than five times her body weight - toward Couturier at speeds approaching that of a bullet train. Followed by another.

And then another.

"I JUST HAVE TO OUTLAST YOU!"

A sly smile graced the corners of Couturier's lips as she darted around the approaching debris, lithe limbs betraying inhuman prowess effortlessly avoiding the lethal barrage of concrete and assorted material. She moved only as much as necessary. Her feet skated across the surface of the road as asphalt and pavement exploded upwards in thick columns accompanied by deafening bursts of near-sonic booms. It took her a second to notice when the barrage finally ended. Another second to realize she'd been corralled back the way she'd originally came. And a third to permanently sear into her thoughts a familiar thigh-high boot descending towards her face.

KABOOM!

"Oh, darn."

A measure of resignation clung to Couturier's voice as she laid half-buried into the pavement, "Looks like you beat me."

Panting wildly as sweat pouring down her face mixed with dirt, dust and whatever grime she'd picked up over the last ten minutes, Rumi kept her foot pressed firmly against Couturier's throat, "It's over," silhouetted against the crescent moon hanging over Corusco, sirens and various other noises signaling every hero in a twenty-kilometer radius finally arrived to act as backup, she grinned a mouthful of eager teeth, "Use your fancy Quirk and I'll pound your ugly face inside-out!"

Couturier didn't answer.

She merely smiled as the color faded from her costume and skin, leaving her white as the moon and slowly unraveling into something vaguely resembling cotton.

"Mon-Mignon Prêt-à-Porter!" Couturier smiled, "Did you have fun playing with my cute little doppelganger?" she laughed. And laughed proudly, "For the number five hero, I expected you to figure it out, but I guess you're nothing more than a dumb animal," most of her body was gone, "I replaced myself when you were busy consoling those heroes! And you didn't even notice!" she giggled, "Oh, well, since you're not busy, can you tell Ryuko I'm sorry. I honestly didn't expect her to pull something so bizarre. It took me off-guard and I ~might~ have overreacted just a tiny bit."

Rumi smashed her foot into the villain only to hit nothing but a few colorless strands of lingering fabric.

"Shit!"

She cursed.

At herself.

At the villain.

And, after sitting next to Ryuko's bed at Corusco General Hospital, at not being able to save the *five* heroes struck down by Couturier.

Interlude 9

"... motives are currently unknown. Although many are speculating they're connected to the so-called league of villains who attacked UA High last month..."

CLICK!

"... the number of injuries continues to rise. However, thanks to the rabbit hero Mirko, who police believe was the villain's target, casualties in Corusco have been minimal..."

CLICK!

"... Akito Inumuta, Corusco chief of police, has promised a complete investigation..."

CLICK!

"... the hero killer Stain - Chizome Akaguro - was apprehended last evening by Endeavor. When pressed for comment, Endeavor..."

CLICK!

"... believed by many heroes, including All Might, as the late Isshin Matoi's killer, the villain known as Couturier managed to evade capture by both the rabbit hero Mirko and the former vanguard of the Tempest Storm Agency, Monsoon. Sources also confirm the presence of Isshin Matoi's daughter, Ryuko Matoi, yet authorities refuse to confirm nor deny..."

CLICK!

An older-looking gentleman, gruff and possessing a sense of well-deserved arrogance, tapped two fingers against the keyboard. With the slightest hint of static, the various network feeds faded into darkness, leaving only the humming from machinery and equipment

nobody other than himself could comprehend filling the silence. A silence he found both assuring and comforting. One which granted a measure of importance as he addressed the man sitting just out of arm's range. A figure dwarfing his own diminutive height and whose presence could only be compared to a veritable force of nature.

"Perhaps events didn't unfold as fully anticipated," unable to observe reports and news anchors announce yesterday's events yet quite capable of hearing the nervousness clinging to their voices, the looming figure smiled. A mouthful of predatory and gleaming teeth made all the more frightening by the tubes sticking out of his cheeks, neck and throat, "Yet it was still a resounding success."

"Success? More like a disaster."

Contrary to his master's cheerful disposition, Kyudai Garaki drowned his frustrations with veiled contempt.

"I'd already written the three Nomu you lent to Shigaraki as complete losses. A combination of his childish infatuation and Endeavor's presence in Hosu assured the likelihood of their survival, let alone recovery, was zero," looking no younger than sixty-five, bald and with a bushy mustache which only drew attention to his goggles and hunched appearance when in proximity to the only person he respected, the scientist known by the pseudonym Daruma Ujiko throw his hands into the artificial darkness of his personal laboratory, "But for *Nui* to misplace a near high-end after promising - *promising* - to bring it back unharmed!? Ugh! Five months of hard work down the drain! Although the data collected is useful, this is quite a setback."

"We should have expected as much from this country's number five hero - Mirko the Rabbit."

The man known only by his Quirk considered the information with an absence of attachment similar to that of a child observing an insect missing a wing, "While her Quirk isn't strong on its own, through experience and rigorous training she's managed to make something of it. It's actually rather impressive," unable to observe the world and

in constant numb pain thanks to his wounds, he rubbed his chin, fingers grazing the lowermost tendrils of scarred tissue, "Yet despite her misguided arrogance and bravado, we both know Rumi Usagiyama was not the primary reason Nui found herself forced to pull back."

Kyudai Garaki removed his goggles and cleaned them on the hem of his coat.

"Mon-Mignon Prêt-à-Porter," the amoral scientist repeated the foreign phrase with a measure of reverence as information scrolled on the screens in front of them, "To believe she'd be forced into using something like *that* . Hmm, she must have been truly desperate. Perhaps last night wasn't a total failure after all."

A wide, perhaps overly friendly smile greeted the doctor's admittance.

"Sometimes one forgets Nui is only a single piece on the table. Granted, her abilities are useful. Our pawns would not be so well-positioned if she hadn't already cleared the table for us. Yet one person, no matter their strength or cunning, hero and villain alike, can be defeated by superior numbers," the deceptively disabled mastermind raised his hand, calloused fingers pointing at three images despite being unable to actually see them, "Monsoon... Ryuko... Mirko..." eyes missing, ears destroyed and nose but a stump, all buried beneath long-healed scarred tissue impossible to reverse with Super Regeneration, All For One raised a question he'd been wondering for some time, "Remind me - what did she pick as her hero name again?"

There was a moment of honest silence as Kyudai Garaki accessed the backdoor he'd installed into the hero database, "Senketsu, I believe."

Upon hearing such an audacious moniker, the most dangerous villain in the country even *after* getting his head crushed by All Might genuinely laughed, "Did she now?"

As he laughed, data packets transferred from multiple servers across the country, hidden in abandoned warehouses and factories purchased under shell companies and charities. All owned by other shell companies. All based overseas. Kyudai Garaki tapped several keys. And upon the final ten-digit code, gigabytes of data - video recordings, information gathered through low-access security companies, surveillance tapes, reports pilfered from police and heroes by inside sources, moles and blackmailed persons - streamed through redundant cables into his laboratory. And another stroke opened them despite his master being unable to see their glory with his own eyes.

Not after All Might's deplorable and heinous behavior.

"There's something else. Something Madam Kiryuin *won't* appreciate," invoking her name immediately drew his master's full and undivided attention, "It occurred following Ryuko's rather ingenious application of her Quirk. Prior to regeneration and for a few minutes afterwards, Nui underwent what I can only conclude was a psychotic break. Increased aggression and anger... loss of objective reasoning... temporary, of course, but I'm hesitant to presume it won't happen again. Under other circumstances," his goggles glowed opaquely from the light radiating off the computer, "It might be wise to reassign her until I'm capable of determining what, if anything, caused her to momentarily disobey your orders."

It was a question.

And yet not a question.

"You have a point. That is rather concerning," and when deafening silence reached what little remained of his ears, All For One leaned backwards and folded calloused fingers across his chest, "I'll speak with Nui about this. And impress that until I'm completely satisfied she's capable of understanding orders, further interactions with Ryuko are forbidden without my explicit approval," the machines keeping him alive, barely at that, continued pumping fluids, medicine and liquids through holes into his body, "I'm certain she'll find my

decision unfair, but she's left me little choice. If she cannot be trusted to follow orders, she cannot be trusted to act under her own recognizance."

"That might be a tad too harsh."

As someone who refused to discard anything and everything unless, and with no exception, it no longer served a use to his master, Kyudai Garaki wasn't quite prepared to determine Nui a failure from a single mistake, "As things stand, the League of Villains lacks manpower. If the heroes were to track down Shigaraki, she would be the only one standing between him and Tartarus. Is that not why you ordered her to watch over Tomura? A completely loyal bodyguard beholden to nobody other than yourself."

All For One pondered his comrade's words, "Until Tomura Shigaraki is capable of spreading his wings and soaring under his own power, he requires assistance. Someone capable of protecting him from the cruelties of society."

Scarred tissue twitched as the ancient villain leaned on his knuckles, "Her ability to blend into society without being seen has proven quite invaluable. Dare I say, helpful," one of the tubes feeding fluids into his damaged body shifted, "However, sometimes being seen is useful. By striking into the heart of Corusco, attacking the number five hero and escaping into the night, she has demonstrated the League of Villains isn't to be underestimated. The villain who murdered Professor Isshin Matoi appears only to escape," a dark chuckle followed a slight cough, "Perhaps she went overboard, but in conjunction with how quickly the Hero Killer's ideology is spreading over the internet, I do believe Tomura Shigaraki should expect many villains eager to join his burgeoning organization."

The villain paused, his smile fading.

"Still - " and an almost concerned tone entered his voice, " - it's somewhat concerning Mirko managed to retain some memory of Nui's appearance. This could be troubling."

A mocking scoff prefaced Kyudai Garaki standing up and stroking his chin.

"We always knew Perceptual Manipulation wasn't foolproof," walking around his heavily injured master, he adjusted the fluids and regenerative medicines, "Yet I'm not particularly worried. If the hero organization weren't capable of determining Nui's identity from Ryuko's perfect recollection, it's unlikely Rumi Usgiyama's incomplete recollection of 'light-colored eyes and youngish face' will prove any more useful."

"Is that so?"

A voice broke through the silence.

A distinctively feminine and sensuous voice.

"How long were you listening?" his heart angrily pounded while the possibility someone managed to infiltrate his laboratory, bypassing the heavy defenses and coming within a hair's breadth of his master became something less dangerous but quite a bit more irritating, Kyudai Garaki swiveled towards the computer and the single 'audio-only' connection.

"Long enough."

Ragyo Kiryuin was not a short-tempered woman. In her line of business, cutthroat and ruthless despite public relations and appearances, one couldn't afford letting personal feelings and emotions cloud their judgment, "That's why I'm waiting for someone to explain why Nui returned in such terrible condition," which is why during those extremely rare moments when she *did* let some of her anger slip through the cracks, it was all the more intimidating, "Otherwise I'll be forced to address my complaints... personally."

There was no mistaking the threat clinging to those innocuous words.

"Now see - "

Yet it wasn't nearly enough to prevent All For One from interrupting his friend's valiant attempt at defending his honor, "Are you upset?"

"Upset? Not at all. Merely... displeased," her tone, sharp as a sword, hardened so gradually it was impossible to determine when she stabbed you in the stomach. Silhouetted against the rising sun beginning to peak over Corusco Ward's horizon, alone for the moment while secretaries and managers worked triple-time to reschedule clients and meetings that had been planned weeks in advance, Ragyo allowed the blatant falsehood to percolate across the secured connection before continuing with the same breath, "You might not care, which is a shame, but as High-Order Tailor, Nui's skills are invaluable. Her absence, even for a few days, will be noticed. How do you intend to rectify that? For your sake, it better be good."

All For One smiled.

"Souichiro was correct."

Three words.

Only three words.

Maroon eyes snapped to the cheap disposable phone. Manicured fingers relaxed, allowing the phone to slip into a more comfortable grip. And Ragyo Kiryuin *smiled*, "I'm listening..."

Chapter 29

As May drew to a close and June announced itself early with unreasonably hot afternoons and bitterly cold mornings, the students of Class 1-A returned to their normal lives.

A week of work-studies had come and gone, leaving those who'd participated more experienced, knowledgeable and possessing just a tad of humility on what it means to be a hero.

Some were hardly changed while others found their horizons forever expanded.

And yet others still...

WHAM!

WHAM!

"Glad you guys made it back alive," Eijiro Kirishima barely felt the impact. Oh, he *felt* it. But thanks to his Quirk, he felt Bakugo dropping him to the ground and grabbing his throbbing and bruised hand far more than the guy's punch, "Seriously. I heard the hero killer was a real piece of work."

"Yeah, you guys were lucky Endeavor showed up and beat the snot out of him," half-paying attention to the volcano on the verge of erupting, Sato Rikido nodded.

"That's so cool!" a mixture of Japanese and English profanity filled the classroom as Toru wiggled her hips and cheered, "Just what I'd expect from the number two hero!"

Todoroki stared at the faint scratch marks on his desk.

There was so much wrong with Hagakure's praise that he honestly didn't know where to begin.

"Yeah," but with somber acceptance of the situation, he allowed the falsehood to further propagate, "He saved us."

"Hosu sounded pretty rough, but at least the hero killer wasn't anything like that blonde psycho working for the League of Villains," having escaped Bakugo for the moment, Kirishima clenched his hands and grimaced. He'd only caught a glimpse of Couturier after Ryuko punched her across the USJ. That had been bad enough. But watching the villain pull her head out of the ground and smile was unnerving, especially since he couldn't *remember* her smile, "To take out five pros without touching them. Glad I didn't have to fight her."

"It's difficult to imagine how Ryuko survived against such a villain not once, but twice," in contrast to his friends, Tokoyami couldn't recall learning anything of actual importance from his work-study. Hawks had done everything on his own, leaving him to clean up the hero's messes. And what little time he had with the hero revolved around answering any questions about the League of Villains.

"Sure, that psycho's crazy, don't get me wrong," Kaminari didn't want to think about Couturier any more than necessary, "But Stain's pretty evil. And super tenacious. I mean, you all saw Edgeshot's interview last night, right? It turns out Endeavor never would have caught the hero killer if Ryuko's old man hadn't figured out the guy's Quirk. That sort of makes him cool, don't you think?"

"Kaminari!"

It didn't take Izuku shouting for Kaminari to realize what he'd said, "Oh, sorry!"

"No, it's okay," Ida stared at the bandages underneath his sleeve, remnants of his mistakes, "You're fine. It's true he is quite a tenacious villain. I understand why people might think he is cool. But instead of helping the world, his beliefs led him to cold-blooded murder. No matter his motives, killing cannot be condoned," there was nobody he could blame besides himself for his injuries. Matoi had attempted to warn him about vengeance leaving one's heart

empty and abandoned. And Manual deduced his intentions. Yet he'd pressed forward under the naïve assumption knowing Stain's Quirk while concealing his own would provide an insurmountable advantage. A mindset that almost got him killed, "Which is why to keep anyone from suffering a similar fate, I promise I will strive to be the perfect hero!"

"Let's do it!"

"IT'S TIME FOR CLASS TO BEGIN!" faster than his epiphany could settle, Ida shifted into third gear, "EVERYONE PLEASE TAKE YOUR SEATS!"

"He's back."

"This is your fault for talking about weird stuff."

"I'm sorry. I'm going to keep my mouth shut."

"Hey, that reminds me," having successfully brought Kaminari back to earth, Jiro addressed the elephant in the room, "Tsu, you know when Ryuko's coming back?"

"I think she said she was being released from the hospital tomorrow," Tsuyu turned a page in her book on amphibious and aquatic heroes, "Or today. It depends on what the hospital says. She was pretty beat up. Anyway, when we talked last night, Ryuko complained about the meat at the hospital being awful. Or maybe it was the hospital refusing to put any meat in her meals," she tipped a finger against her chin as Jiro and Mina leaned closer, "It was hard to tell. She was basically bored, which usually means she's fine."

"Well, I think we should head on over to her apartment and cheer her up!" an empty sleeve pumped the air as Toru spun around, "Hey, Mina, you have her address, right?"

"Sure do!"

The acidic hero-in-training pulled out a pink phone, " *And* I wrote down directions so we don't get lost like last time!"

"How did you get lost?" Kirishima scratched his head, "Doesn't she live, like, ten minutes from school or something?"

"It's not my fault!" a pinkish blush spread across Mina's face, " *Someone* put the wrong address into my phone!"

"You mean *you* put in the wrong address," perched on the edge of his desk, Tokoyami's hawk-like eyes snapped onto Mina.

"S-Shut up!"

"ENOUGH ALREADY!"

His patience with everyone, everyone and reality itself had reached its breaking point. It was bad enough he spent the last week getting groomed at that useless internship, but Matoi fighting Couturier was the final straw. And his *parents* asking if they were friends only boiled everything over into a frothing rage of annoyance and frustration, "Matoi's fine! So quit talking like she's dead!"

"Kacchan..."

"WHAT THE HELL DID I JUST SAY, DEKU!?"

Just before Bakugo's frustration reached critical mass and went nuclear, the door at the front of the classroom slid open.

Only it wasn't their teacher.

"R-Ryuko!?" Izuku was the first, but not the only, person to blurt out her name.

To say that Ryuko Matoi had seen better days would be an understatement comparable to claiming All Might was *the* strongest hero in the country. Her uniform was pressed without so much as a single wrinkle. Yet her navy-blue hair was disheveled far more than

unusual. Almost as if she'd rolled out of bed and immediately stumbled to school. Layers upon layers of bandages covered her forehead. More could be seen poking through her collar. But it was her right arm which drew the most attention. Several clean and goddamn painful breaks had left her arm stuck in an cast and held against her stomach by a sling she couldn't remove without re-experiencing that psycho villain kicking her over and over again.

"Yup, that's me."

Without another word, Ryuko slid the door shut, shuffled towards her desk and parked her ass down.

She wanted to be left alone.

But the awkward silence made that impossible.

"What?" everybody was staring at her, "Someone die?"

"We thought you were still in the hospital after fighting that crazy villain," Rikido blurted.

"I was," Ryuko clicked her tongue while sounding bored and irritated, "Got released last night. The docs said there was nothing else they could do. Ordered me to take it easy for the rest of the week, when *this* thing - " she motioned towards the cast covering most of her arm with her eyes, " - comes off."

Four days.

Four days of laying in the hospital bored out of her freaking mind.

Half a week of nothing but daytime dramas, soap operas and the news.

Rumi sneaking her phone into the hospital so she could text Tsuyu and Habuko had been the only thing that kept her from snapping.

"You look like shit."

Less angry than normal, yet somehow phenomenally more frustrated than half the heroes and villains in Musutafu, Bakugo shoulder checked Kirishima while ignoring the background characters whose names he'd forgotten. Or didn't bother learning in the first place, "Guessing you had trouble kicking that blonde freak's ass, huh?"

"Now hold on just a minute!" Ida slid into the picture, arm swinging and mouth moving, "That's completely out of line!"

"Tch, that your way of saying you were worried?" ignoring their class rep's attempt at stopping the inevitable, Ryuko scoffed, "Didn't know you cared."

"I don't," something must have happened during his work-study, because instead of falling into an unyielding rage, Bakugo ignored her taunt, "Just want to know if you gave as good as you got."

There wasn't any reason to say anything.

It wouldn't make her feel better.

"You remember hitting her point-blank with an explosion?" and it wouldn't piss off Bakugo, which pretty much left no other reason that she simply wanted to. End of story, "Did the same thing with her head. Blew it and her freaking smile clean off her shoulders."

"YOU DID WHAT!?"

Kirishima was the first to recover, "Hang on - what!?"

Followed by Kaminari and Mineta, "That's super hardcore!"

It was enough of a shock that Uraraka was dragged out of her Zen-like trance, whereupon sounds tangentially related to words escaped her mouth, "GAFAFA!?! HUH!?"

Sitting at the front of the classroom, smiling on the outside while internally sweating, Aoyama struggled to retain his fabulous composure, "Oh my..."

"Woah," Jiro whistled, "Talk about serious overkill."

"I'm certain she didn't have any other alternative against such a dangerous villain," Yaoyorozu cupped her chin while glancing towards the windows.

"Hmm, that sounds excessive," nonplussed about her confession of attempted murder, Tokoyami nodded, "Although if Couturier's regeneration is as powerful as she and Bakugo say it is, hitting her with anything less than lethal force would have been tantamount to suicide."

"Can't say I wouldn't have done the same thing in her shoes," Kirishima agreed with some measure of reluctance.

"Seriously, you guys?" holding onto an earlobe, Jiro stared at Tokoyami and Kirishima like they'd collectively grown three heads and were breathing fire and lightning.

"Wait just a darn minute!"

Mina wasn't so much surprised as enthusiastically curious. And she didn't hesitate to make that known by slamming her hands against Ryuko's desk, "How the heck did you do that?"

Ryuko felt an eyebrow twitch, "Does it matter?"

She should have known that was the completely *wrong* thing to tell Mina.

"What!?" a measure of desperation clung to the acidic girl's crackling voice, "Of course, it does!"

"No, it doesn't," annoyed by the invasion of her personal space, Ryuko attempted to ignore Mina, hoping she'd give up and eventually go away, "Now go away."

"I'm *not* leaving until you tell me how you did it!" which was even *worse* than giving Mina something for the gossip portion of her mind

to latch onto, "Because I *gotta* know!"

"No."

"Yes!"

" *No!* "

"YES!"

"Alright, fine," Ryuko finally snapped, not only because Mina wouldn't take the hint, but because Toru was inching closer by the second, "You want to know what I did?" one day out of the hospital and things were already completely back to normal. Bakugo was a jackass, Izuku muttered under his breath and Mina was too curious for her own freaking good. God damn it, she should have just kept her mouth shut, "I shot her. With a bullet. From my own blood. That answer your question?"

"WHAT!?"

"Wha... wha... wha... WHAT!?"

That was Mina leaning close enough to see the pinkish veins in her black and yellow eyes, "Since when could you do that!?"

"It shouldn't come as too much of a surprise," and that was Ida - no wait, that was Izuku, standing next to Ida and muttering under his breath, "Ryuko's Quirk gives her complete and total control over her blood. She can manipulate its shape and density into whatever she imagines. I'd presumed her Quirk was limited to short-ranged weaponry. Anything she could hold in her hands. But there shouldn't be anything stopping her from telekinetically firing spheres of blood at a target, which raises the question of whether or not the blood used for such attacks can be recovered..."

"That's enough."

The door separating Class 1-A's nonsense from UA's general insanity slid open with noticeable laziness, "We have a long week ahead of us," holding his sleeping bag beneath one arm while scratching his temple with the other, Shota Aizawa yawned while crawling towards the lectern at the front of the room, "And I'd rather not waste too much time talking."

Someone coughed.

Aizawa ignored them.

"It appears some of you had quite the interesting work-studies," he didn't name names. That wasn't necessary, "Oh, and Matoi - " said girl didn't say anything. Not with words. She merely adjusted her cast, rolled her eyes, leaned onto her functional arm and awaited his inevitable dressing down. Which was both insulting and accurate. His original plan *had* been to call her out. But learning the truth had quickly put a damper on that plan. It was one thing to throw away everything in pursuit of vengeance. It was something else entirely for the villain who killed your father to hunt you down while you were eating with the country's number five hero.

He couldn't scold Matoi since she hadn't done anything wrong.

At the same time, he couldn't *not* scold her.

" - you look terrible," he probably could have phrased that better, but Matoi really did look terrible. Had she escaped the hospital? Anyone else and he wouldn't have given that even a fraction of his attention. But this was Matoi, which meant the chances she *had* walked out of the hospital before her wounds were properly treated were fifty-fifty. At best, "You're in no condition to participate in today's practical lessons. That doesn't mean you can relax. Even if you can't physically participate, I expect you to attend All Might's lesson and write a summary of what you learned. Got it?"

She nodded.

"Great," after nodding back, Aizawa swept his exhausted eyes across the room, "As for the rest of you, your essays on everything you have learned during your work-studies are due by the end of the week. Five hundred words. Minimum," the usual suspects immediately went white as he reminded them about the *written* portion of their internships, "This includes you, Matoi. Recovering in the hospital is no excuse for falling behind on your schoolwork."

Chapter 30

"What were you thinking pulling a ridiculous stunt like that!?"

It was amazing how someone could raise their voice without actually shouting. If she didn't know the guy's Quirk, she wouldn't thought *that* was his talent. Or maybe it was a special talent and had nothing to do with Quirks. She didn't know and really couldn't give a crap. Alone in the other class's homeroom, the clock above the door ticking past four thirty in the afternoon, backpack slung over her shoulder and wearing enough bandages to make a mummy jealous, Ryuko scratched her nose, grumbled and wondered what she should cook for dinner. In that order. Maybe grilled chicken with vegetables. Or boiled beef with caper sauce. Or maybe stir fry beef with cranberry sauce?

Or everything.

Yeah, everything worked.

But dinner would have to wait because in the span of less than two minutes everything had gone to hell. She'd come to Vlad King for advice on improving her new move. Just like he asked. She'd followed directions. And how did he repay her kindness? By shouting in her face. It was why she *really* didn't care about his opinion. Because as their 'discussion' dragged past twenty minutes, her temper was rapidly descending into previously uncharted depths of annoyance and indignation, "In my defense, she was trying to kill me."

The tip of her nose itched.

She scratched it.

"Tell me, Matoi," jaw clenched tightly, Sekijiro Kan growled low enough that halfway across campus, Hound Dog's sensitive ears

perked up, "Was it worth abusing your Quirk?"

Her mood plummeted another couple of stories before somehow rebounding back into something vaguely resembling boredom. She knew what he was doing. He was trying to make her apologize. Or admit she'd made a mistake. Her lips twisted into a glower. It would be a cold day in hell before she so much as considered apologizing. For anything. Because she'd done absolutely nothing wrong. And if Vlad King expected any sort of apology or half-assed excuse justifying her actions, he was going to be waiting a goddamn long time. She didn't need to justify anything. Her arm might be broken in several places and she'd spent the better part of a week recovering in the hospital, but the look on Couturier's face right before it disintegrated had almost been worth the psycho turning everything around and kicking her freaking ass.

Almost .

"Gotta say..." she lazily shifted her backpack, "... yeah, it really was."

Apparently that was the wrong answer.

Her hair *rustled* when Vlad King's ironclad grasp on his patience slipped, "DO YOU REGRET *ANYTHING* !?"

It was a ridiculous question.

So ridiculous, in fact, she considered turning around and walking out the door, consequences be damned. That was how ridiculous it was. God, why was she even talking to him? She could be doing anything else. Literally *anything* . Like hanging out with Tsu and Mako or dinner. Even doing homework sounded fun compared to whatever this was. Oh, right, she was trapped with Vlad King because she had to ask him for advice on improving her bullets. A hiss escaped her throat, followed by an unsubtle growl as she scratched the back of her neck and wondered whether to tell the truth or come up with a bullshit excuse if it meant getting home that much faster.

"My only regret is that I didn't kill her," it was impossible to separate her sarcasm from the vitriol turning her words radioactive.

Sekijiro wasn't a man who easily lost his temper.

As a professional hero and teacher, he couldn't afford allowing provocations and insults worm their way beneath his skin. He had thick skin and thicker blood. Which was why despite raising his voice, he remained as courteous and forthcoming with Ryuko Matoi as he did any student seeking guidance and assistance. She'd come to him for help and he'd be damned if he allowed his personal feelings interfere with his duties. No matter his opinion on the matter, he understood why Matoi developed such a dangerous technique. It didn't mean he condoned her decision. Merely that he understood the reasons behind it. This wasn't a philosophical or political conversation between two heroes on the merits of using lethal force against unrepentant villains who'd shown neither remorse nor compunctions against destruction and murder. This was a student - a young and emotionally damaged girl - completely invested in bringing her father's killer to justice.

Or whatever form of justice she felt was appropriate.

Attempting to dissuade Matoi would only serve to drive her deeper into obsession.

And truth be told, he found it regrettable she'd failed to put down that psychotic monster.

"Hmph, I cannot deny your ability possesses both incredible penetrative power *and* versatility. I might even go so far as to suggest I'm impressed," impressed was an understatement of the highest order, "My *point* is that you shouldn't do something so reckless without considering the consequences," contentment and disapproval intermingled, "We've discussed the differences between our Quirks. Unlike me, you only have a limited amount of blood," behind the orange visor, his eyes narrowed as the last dredges of frustration extinguished themselves, "Which is why I'm disappointed

with you. Powerful or not, what good is a technique if you can only use it five or six times before losing consciousness? That's a question you should have asked yourself."

Ryuko rolled her eyes.

"Didn't you tell me I had to *think creatively*?" from the twitching of his jaw, she must've hit a raw nerve.

"I *also* said to speak with me if you needed advice. Which you didn't," Vlad King growled through clenched teeth before relaxing, "Of course, I'm no fool. You didn't buckle down and create this technique to -"

"Armor-Piercing Blood Bullet."

A gray eyebrow drifted above his visor, "I beg your pardon?"

"You heroes name all your moves," a snort ripped out of her throat alongside a mocking grin, "Well, that's *my* move's name. Got a problem with it?"

"Not at all," Sekijiro didn't care one way or another about the name. It was awkward. And almost a mouthful to say, let alone think. But the unwritten rules - and several written laws passed over the decades - granted heroes free reign to name their techniques as long as they remained within appropriate guidelines, "As I was saying, you developed your technique solely to take down Couturier, correct?" when Matoi nodded, he unfolded his arms, "That's what I thought. While I'm disappointed you didn't speak with me about it, it's impossible to question the results. Against such an enemy, one must strive to push themselves beyond their normal limits. Plus Ultra, if you will. However, that being said, until you work out the problems inherent in your technique, you're forbidden from using it on anyone other than Couturier. Do so and I'll have you expelled on the spot! Do I make myself clear, Matoi?"

The sun lingered just above the skyline outside the windows, casting orange-red light across the classroom.

"Yeah... yeah..."

Leaving Ryuko shifting her weight from one foot to the other despite agreeing with the older hero.

"Very well," beady eyes flickered towards the clock, memorizing the time before snapping back towards the mildly insubordinate student, "Moving on, I assume you've been keeping up with the list of exercises I gave you?"

She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and looked away, "Ain't like there was anything else I *could* do in the hospital."

Vlad King smirked.

"Great," a strange and disturbing weight existed behind that frightening smile, "Once you've finished recovering we can move onto phase two!"

She blinked.

"Yeah, I know what you're thinking," he most certainly *didn't* know what she was thinking, "I would have started tomorrow, but school policy forbids practical training for any student on the hero course if they've been discharged from a hospital within the last forty-eight hours," he grumbled out several lines from the teacher's handbook, which made more sense in his head, "Alright! Phrase two involves teaching you one of my secret moves! And it's a good one! But don't expect it to be easy! This is an advanced and difficult move! Even with your impressive control, you'll find it quite difficult! One hour a day, six days a week after classes are finished, in Gym Gamma! At three thirty sharp!"

"Uh-huh..."

Her expression faltered from curiosity to annoyance in record time.

It wasn't the prospect of learning a new move that caused her eyes to narrow. Or her fingers to clench. If it meant kicking Couturier's pompous and psychotic ass, she'd leap headfirst into hell itself. Naked, if necessary. What she didn't like, and the reason she refrained from truly speaking her mind, was Vlad King single-handedly screwing up her schedule. A schedule Yaoyorozu found impressive. A new move was freaking terrific. And spending every afternoon for the foreseeable future learning said new move was even *better* while also studying for final exams and doing homework *and* everything else in her life, "How long are we talking?"

"Hmm, well, let's see..." the hero cupped his chin, "... it took me at least two months. So, I'd say about a month. Three weeks at the minimum."

She breathed in.

Then exhaled.

"I'll learn it in week."

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" it was abrupt. It was sudden. And it annoyed the goddamn hell out of her. Tossing his head back, Vlad King laughed. And laughed. And laughed, "Is that so?" eventually stopping, he smirked, "You're good, Mato, but not that good."

"Oh, yeah?"

She countered with a far more vicious and cunning smile, "Then let's make a deal," it did nothing against the veteran hero, but it made her feel better, "If I learn your stupid technique in a week, you'll have that copycat give a speech on how much better Class 1-A is than Class 1-B. During *Lunch Rush*."

"... and when you *don't*," the homeroom teacher emphasized each and every word, "You will henceforth refer to me as Mister Sekijiro

until the day you leave these hallowed halls!"

There were many things she despised.

And far more she hated.

But Monoma standing in the middle of Lunch Rush the day before their practical exams, teeth clenched and hands shaking as he forced out a speech comparing Class 1-A to the great All Might and countless other heroes, was perhaps one of the greatest moments of her life.

Chapter 31

Life had developed a rhythm at UA.

It wasn't so much *boring*, although it lacked excitement, as it was repetitive. Which was fine in her book. Go to class, study for mid-terms and finals, finish her homework, go shopping, cook dinner, hang out with Tsu and Mako, threaten to castrate that little pervert if he so much as snuck a glance at her panties. And last but not least, give absolutely zero shits about Bakugo's nonsense. She literally didn't have time to deal with him. And she certainly didn't have time to explain how she one-upped him on the mid-terms without studying until her eyes bled and her wrists developed carpal tunnel syndrome.

Wham! Wham!

But that had nothing to do with why she was in Gym Beta, quite possibly the only 'normal' gymnasium at UA, wearing a white shirt alongside the lower half of her PE uniform, hands covered in powdered chalk and wailing on an abused punching bag at five in the afternoon on a Saturday three weeks after their work-studies finished, two weeks until their finals and a week after she'd proven smart enough to master Vlad King's advanced move. As much as she hated to think it, the guy hadn't been lying. Something like that was goddamn annoying to learn. But to figure out on his own, without anyone to give him hints or direction or tell him if he was doing it wrong?

Wham! Wham!

Her knuckles impacted the heavy bag.

Wham! Wham!

It was hard forgetting what she saw and heard.

And it was goddamn *difficult* forgetting everything she'd felt.

Wham! Wham!

She'd given one hundred and ten percent of her effort into putting Couturier down once and for all. She'd thrown everything at the wall, pushed herself beyond her limits and ignored her screaming body. And for what? What had she accomplished? Nothing had worked. Nothing had slowed that psycho down for more than a moment. And even *that*... even her best efforts... had been because the bitch held back.

Wham! Wham!

Couturier had toyed with her.

From the beginning... from the goddamn beginning... Couturier had been holding back.

Wham! Wham!

Something snapped.

Wham! Wham!

Her heart pounded.

Wham! Wham!

Her blood boiled.

Wham! Wham!

Anger crept along the edges of her mind.

Wham! Wham!

She needed to get stronger.

Wham! Wham!

A lot stronger.

Wham! Wham!

Not just for herself.

But to protect her friends.

WHAM!

Her knuckles impacted the punching bag, then *twisted* . The impact reverberated down her hand, up her forearm and dissipated against her shoulder. As the bag, ninety-kilogram and counting, flew upwards, reaching far enough that the metal chain bent almost in half, she stepped aside, allowing it to swing back and forth. Sweat trickled down her cheeks, pooling against her chin. She swallowed, aggravating her parched throat. Her hair laid matted against her forehead and neck. Exhausted yet not tired, she caught the punching bag mid-swing and scoffed at the picture of All Might's to-scale face she'd taped to the side.

"Hah... hah... hah..."

The water bottle was halfway to her mouth when her phone buzzed.

It was Mina.

"New! Cat! Café!"

That was all.

That was the entire message.

Three simple words.

And enough pink hearts and kitten emojis to give her a cavity.

As her mood shifted rapidly from one corner of the spectrum to the other, she parked her ass down on the nearest bench, clenched the

water bottle between her teeth and unlocked her phone as *more* messages scrolled into view.

"OMG!"

"They have blueberry MUFFINS!"

"So tiny!"

The sheer disgust she felt at the mere *thought* of a themed café was violently smothered when Mina texted a literal scrapbook of pictures. At least nine. All of her, Uraraka, Yaoyorozu and Toru at the supposed café. One eyebrow twitching, cheek pinched between her teeth and heart plummeting into bitterness, Ryuko swiped her thumb against the screen. Pictures of muffins. Pictures of other people. Pictures of Uraraka choking on three muffins while Yaoyorozu ran behind her. More pictures of muffins. A couple of pictures of everybody getting together while women dressed as maids with fake cat ears and tails walked behind them.

At least, she seriously hoped they were fake.

"Do. They. Have. Strawberry?" she typed out each word, hit send and yawned.

She didn't even get to finish yawning before Mina telepathically communicated another textbook.

"YES!"

"You should TOTALLY come!"

"UA gets discounts!"

"Almost free!"

"Ugh..."

Revulsion, disgust and hunger fought within her soul as she stared at Mina's misspelled texts. A sour taste built inside her mouth, matched only by the knots in her stomach. Her right eyebrow twitched. God damn it, this sucked. It was an impossible choice. On one hand, she'd rather have dinner with Couturier than go inside a themed café. Especially a *cat-themed* café. Quite possibly the worst thing to have been invented. A disturbed shiver trickled down her spine. On the other hand, there were freshly baked and delicious strawberry muffins that pretty much melted in her mouth. She felt her stomach rumble. Her tongue licked the corners of her mouth, dragging against her teeth and lips. And the horror behind confronting something she hated almost as much as Couturier shattered in the face of instinctive desire for delicious and mouthwatering muffins.

It wasn't a choice she'd regret.

Not now.

Not ever.

"Sounds. Good," her thumbs were pale blurs on the miniature keyboard, "I'll. Be. There. In. Fifteen."

She was halfway to the lockers when her phone buzzed.

"Awesome!"

"We'll save you some muffins!"

Five minutes after texting a brief and simple 'Thanks' to Mina, hair obnoxiously soaked and PE clothes stuffed into her backpack, she swiped her ID at Gym Beta's front door, waited for the shrill *beep*, then hurried into the late spring afternoon plaguing Musutafu with unseasonable humid air. Sneakers slapped against asphalt before being replaced by freshly cut grass. One hand holding onto her backpack and the other hurriedly stuffing her phone into her pocket, Ryuko jogged across campus towards the former Security Wall,

which was now guarded by actual heroes instead of some high-tech system brought down by a single villain. And it was only as the end came into sight, heart barely above a calm pulse and thoughts focused on whether she actually wanted strawberry muffins or something bolder, like carrot-cake, that karma threw another obstacle into her path.

"HA! HA! HA! HA!"

She must have murdered a puppy in a past life.

That was the only explanation.

"I AM HERE AFTER HOURS YET STILL WILLING TO TEACH!"

Her expression barely changed when All Might landed between herself and UA's main entrance in a three-point crouch. In fact, it didn't change at all. Maybe it was her - actually, she knew it was her. And that's why the world's symbol of peace and justice leaping halfway across campus, and wearing that tacky yellow suit, barely registered. Oh, she saw him. There was no way she couldn't miss All Might. He introduced himself with a friendly grin. Chiseled muscles pushed his cheap suit to its limit. Knuckles larger than her fingers pressed against a waistline larger than most trees as the nearly eight-foot man manifested into existence. But caring? That was a bridge too far.

"Find someone else to annoy."

And with that, she walked around the world's greatest hero.

"I... err..."

A dollop of sweat trickled down Toshinori's shadowed yet sculpted visage when Ryuko stepped around him, "... good afternoon, young Ryuko," if he'd hoped being polite was enough to patch things up, he was sorely mistaken. Ryuko was stubborn. Far more than Isshin.

And that man could hold a grudge a mile long, "I was hoping to speak with you about something rather -"

"Not interested."

Ryuko didn't allow him to finish. He could be announcing something impossible, like the end of crime, every villain turning themselves in or Bakugo developing empathy and a sense of humor. It didn't change anything, "Unless you captured that freaking psycho, I really don't care about anything you have to say."

"That's precisely why I've come here."

She stopped, one foot through the entrance and the other hovering inches above the ground.

"There's not much I can say out in the open," the nearly eight-foot-tall wall of muscles and heroism's voice deepened, resembling more his emaciated appearance rather than society's impression, "Sir's implored I keep this information strictly confidential. The less who know, the better. That's all I can say for now," if she didn't know any better, she honestly believed All Might expected someone was eavesdropping on them, "You'll be called to the principal's office on Monday twenty minutes into your fourth period. But instead of going there, go to the faculty lounge."

He paused.

"I don't have all the answers. For that, I'm sorry," despite standing almost two and a half feet taller at the shoulder and strong enough to punch holes through solid concrete without sweating, Toshinori allowed part of his true self to bleed into his public persona, "But one thing I *can* say is that Sir's made a breakthrough regarding the support item you confiscated from Couturier during your last encounter."

Ryuko thought about answering.

She wanted to answer.

But instead, she kept her mouth shut and kept walking.

Interlude 10

"Evening, Shigaraki," the man known throughout the underworld as Giran - his true name wiped from all but a handful of memories and buried under several false identities - rapped his knuckles on the door before pushing the heavy frame inwards, "Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

That smug tone.

That arrogance.

As if he were better than him.

Shigaraki couldn't stand Giran on the best of days, "What do you want?"

"I'm not here to shoot the breeze, if that's what you're wondering," a cigarette appeared between Giran's fingers, already lit and rising towards his lips, "Call me naïve, but I'm surprised your league knows *the* premiere black-market arms dealer in the country. Then again, considering your bodyguard, I'm inclined to believe your pockets are far deeper than anyone could imagine."

The mist surrounding Kurogiri momentarily thickened, "What are you implying?"

"Don't worry. I'm not *that* curious or stupid," the broker's missing tooth vanished when his grin contorted into a frown, "Koketsu's not someone you ask questions about. Not unless you want to end up dead," he left the implication dissuade the tension in the bar before shrugging his shoulders, "And they wouldn't have to do it themselves. Koketsu has friends all over the country. Clients willing to kill their parents for a favor. Ever hear of the Shie Hassaikai? Not the sort of people you want hunting you down."

A haggard scoff defined Shigaraki's dwindling interest.

Kurogiri, sensing his ward's waning attention despite the rather important matter, remained courteous, "Why did Koketsu contact you?"

Smoke drifted around the broker's face.

"To deliver a message," squinted pink eyes behind tinted glasses shifted around the nearly empty room, searching the shadows and corners before returning to the bartender, "That your special order has been finished and is ready for pick up."

"They didn't give it to you?" the deep voice and unfounded suspicion lurking within the question, honest as it was, elicited another shrug.

"Heh, you think Koketsu trusts *me*?" Giran laughed. Not a mocking laugh. Or insulting. But laughter resembling someone who understood a terrible joke, "Sorry, that's not how things operate. Don't get me wrong. I ain't the sort of scum who betrays my clients. Not for money. But Koketsu? Geez, they don't trust anybody. Hell, nobody knows who they are or what they look like. It's always another broker who delivers the goods. Or a disposal phone. Or a cutout of a cutout of a cutout... well, you get the idea," he swept his hand overhead, smoke curling around his fingers, "Got a call two hours ago. Promised a six-figure payment to pass along a message and the address where you'll find your order."

The bartender glanced towards Shigaraki, who had yet to acknowledge Giran beyond his introduction.

"Here."

A cheap, disposable phone, an older model found in every corner store, was dropped onto the counter, "Found this outside my door," Giran took another deep drag, "The password is 5731. You'll find the address in the contacts," stamping out his cigarette in an ash tray, the uncharacteristically somber broker headed back outside, "Don't be a stranger, Shigaraki."

He left without another word.

"Hmm..."

Kurogiri allowed the door to close before turning his undivided attention towards the supposedly innocuous device. The spots functioning as his eyes narrowed. A deep murmur built within his throat. Caution beckoned paranoia as he picked up the phone, dark mist immediately and without conscious prompting acting as an impenetrable barrier between possible explosions and Shigaraki, "It would appear Madam Kiryuin finally came through on her promise."

"Koketsu..."

Support gear capable of working with his Quirk.

Something his Quirk couldn't decay.

It sounded ridiculous.

Crusty nails dug into raw skin, "What kind of stupid name is that?"

"It's most likely a pseudonym. Or an associate acting upon her behalf," a cursory examination proved the password worked. And the address was located in the contacts just as Giran described, "A woman of her esteem and reputation cannot afford association with society's underbelly," satisfied the phone was harmless, Kurogiri's wavering eyes implied a measure of thoughtfulness, "Hmm... the address isn't too far away."

Shigaraki ignored Kurogiri's helpful input.

"Senketsu. Koketsu," a loud *scraping* grated against the darkness as he stood up, "Why does everybody have such ridiculous names?"

Chapter 32

"Do you want some tea?"

"No."

Despite the tension threatening to bubble over into a raging maelstrom, Toshinori nonchalantly shrugged, "Suit yourself," he wouldn't push the issue. If Ryuko refused to drink some of the finest tea at UA, that was her decision. He could talk about how great it was, but once her mind was settled, nothing could force Ryuko to do something she didn't already want to do. If he tried, she'd either find a way to pour the tea down his throat or threaten to do so. And the last thing he needed was Recovery Girl wondering why most of his face, mouth and throat was covered in second and third-degree burns.

The kettle was warm to the touch as he poured half a cups-worth into one of the two cups he'd prepared on the table.

"This might take some time," bereft of the amenities in his shared office and agency, little more than an old high-definition television on the wall, a miniature kitchen and bookshelves stocked with teaching manuals and encyclopedias nobody bothered reading, the faculty lounge nevertheless felt comfortable, "If you want, I can have Lunch Rush bring you something from the cafeteria."

"What I *want* are answers."

On a chair she'd dragged across the lounge, arms folded and foot bouncing on her knee, Ryuko looked and sounded like she'd heard bad news, which wasn't too far from the mark.

"I know," vanilla extract and cinnamon filled Toshinori's head, leaving him swimming in confusion. He wanted to help Ryuko, but the more they pried into Couturier's past, the more questions were raised,

"That's why I'll try to skip unnecessary details," still, it was a small comfort being able to talk in his natural form. He didn't need to keep everything simple and brief. He could talk to his heart's content without worrying about Ryuko discovering the truth. Granted, she figured One for All as a simple augmentation Quirk with an accompanying transformation instead of something far more potent, but given the alternative, he wasn't inclined to correct her, "But before I get into that, there's something I need to ask you."

His shadowed eyes stared at the liquid swirling inside the cup.

"When you use your Quirk," body wracked by the aftermath of his fight with All for One, he maintained a steady façade, "How long do your constructs usually last? Without using the Seki Tekko, I mean."

The chair shifted underneath Ryuko's weight, "Huh?"

"You know, your swords and axes and that shield you whipped out last week when Midoriya and Ida caught you off-guard during hostage extraction," he mimicked swinging a phantom blade, "Isshin told me once back in the day. But I can't remember what he said."

A blush spread across Ryuko's face.

"Why the hell is that important?" her eyes homed onto the weakened hero's sunken expression, "Hang on, are you saying - " it felt like someone slapped her across the face. A punch that knocked the wind from her lungs and left her reeling, " - are you *saying* that sword was part of her Quirk? Just how many Quirks does she freaking have!?"

"That's a complicated question."

Ryuko countered without letting him finish, "I'm a good listener."

"I know you are," as much as he loathed to admit it, complicated was the best way to describe Couturier. A villain with no background possessing four Quirks, maybe five - enhanced regeneration, muscle

augmentation, memory alteration and cloth control. Someone like her didn't just pop out of the woodwork. Not without someone else pulling the strings, "I've fought countless villains over the years. Some were terrible people. Others misguided. But none of them had more than a single Quirk."

That was a boldfaced lie.

He knew *exactly* who gave Couturier her Quirks.

"Mirko told me she filled you in on the details - how she fought Couturier, reclaimed the villain's scissor blade and carried you to the hospital," Toshinori steeped his fingers together and grimaced, "About ten minutes after Couturier retreated, I touched down in Corusco. Pushed myself beyond my limits. I'd hoped to arrive fast enough to help, but it simply wasn't enough," he felt weary, and it had nothing to do with his dwindling power since passing the torch to Midoriya, "Back in my heyday, it would've taken me thirty seconds, but I've grown slower. The consequences of spending decades protecting the innocent and fighting all sorts of dangerous creeps and villains, I suppose."

He'd rushed into action as soon as Sir called.

He hadn't known about Midoriya, Todoroki and Ida encountering the hero killer until another hero mentioned it.

Two attacks by the League of Villains on the same night.

It couldn't be a coincidence.

"I met her at the hospital. And when I got there, things were... chaotic," doctors and nurses examining injured civilians, heroes giving statements and the families of those killed in the line of duty demanding answers. Five heroes. Five genuinely good people murdered by a psychopath for no other reason than they were in her way, "It's where I learned she intended on handing over that strange... scissor blade... to the police."

"Which didn't happen," Ryuko half-asked, half-accused.

"Which didn't happen," nodding along and earning an accepting grunt from the teenager, he sighed, "Chief Inumuta is a good man. I've worked with him a few times. But considering how personal your father's case is, I thought it best to keep information close to the heart. Inumuta wasn't exactly happy, but he understood."

Ryuko listened to what he said.

And what he *didn't* say, "So, where is it?"

"I-Island."

As soon as he answered her question, Toshinori watched the gears turn inside Ryuko's head, "Even with I-Expo coming up, David managed to squeeze some time into his schedule."

Ryuko flinched as if struck.

"Wait a sec," her foot slipped off her knee and slammed onto the floor, "You gave it to the guy with the super bendy fingers?"

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" Toshinori found himself genuinely laughing, "Only you would remember something like that!"

Wiping a tear from his eye as Ryuko gave her best impression of a particularly annoyed lemon, he reached for the tea, having rediscovered his appetite, "As you know, every costume and piece of support equipment has a serial number detailing which company made it, who designed it and when it was made," the tea was warmish-hot. Not burning hot, yet hotter than lukewarm, "The scissor blade lacked any identification marks, which is why I gave it to David. He might not be a high-order tailor, but he has connections I don't. If anyone could figure out who made her sword, it would be him. That's what I thought, at least."

Ryuko's eyebrow twitched, "Because it's her Quirk, right?"

His suit sagged on a bony frame.

"The day before yesterday," he carefully chose his words, "David called Sir."

"Why didn't he call you?" Ryuko spat out faster than he could answer.

"Well, he did," Toshinori coughed into his hand, "But I forgot to charge my phone and... well..." perturbed by Ryuko's expression and the subtle movements of her fingers, he cleared his throat and steadied himself, "Couturier's sword isn't made from metal. Or some exotic material. It's biological," as the bell rang, signaling the start of lunch, midmorning sunlight streamed through the nearby windows, "To be more specific, it's ultra-hardened *blood* ."

My Bloody Academia

Hunched over the table, nothing but a desk lamp illuminating the blue and white schematic, her bandaged fingers gripped the soft-tipped pencil as she scribbled, erased, swept away shavings and rewrote variables, numbers and measurements.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd gotten more than five hours of sleep.

There was simply so much to do between preparing for Paris and London, double-checking every new design, countless meetings and video conferences while ensuring their showcase at I-Expo went absolutely flawless. She was swamped. She had no time to relax or take a vacation. But this *new* development? The reason she was pouring over something so simple in the middle of the afternoon instead of authorizing production schedules, if the stack of papers near her desk were what she thought they were. It wasn't helpful. In fact, it was the opposite of helpful.

"No."

Nui cursed under her breath in a foreign language. She was exhausted. She was overworked. And she was *annoyed* at having to personally correct Ryuko Tatsuma's new costume on top of everything else. How someone in her department managed to make multiple mistakes boggled her mind. It was unbelievable. Did nobody check their work anymore? Everybody made mistakes, but *this* ? If she didn't make it her mission to double-check everything, the hero would have transformed and either been strangled by a costume that didn't properly accommodate her Quirk's explosive transformation or find herself naked in the middle of a busy street.

A mistake like this couldn't be tolerated.

Not under her watch.

Someone was going to get fired.

"Come on, Harime, when was the last time I asked you for anything?"

And his *insistence* on pushing the envelope wasn't helping.

"Oh, let's start with last month when you wanted to know about the kinetic absorption padding we showcased in Hong Kong," eyeballing another atrocious tenth of a millimeter error made by a soon-to-be-former designer, Nui's head bobbed with every perfectly remembered incident, "And three months before that, you asked about the electromagnetic sneakers we're putting on the market early next year. And two weeks before that..."

"Alright. Alright. I get it."

Her personal studio wasn't exactly small by industrial standards, perhaps not the same size as the general production departments downstairs. On the far side of the room, past stacks of forms, papers and ledgers, beyond equipment and machinery most engineers

wouldn't recognize without reading the manuals, nearly hidden by empty coffee mugs stacked nearly two feet above the table, taking up half the monitor while sitting in the comfort of I-Island, David Shield shrugged, "Can't blame a guy for trying. But this is important, Harime."

"I don't care."

She genuinely and legitimately didn't care, because she knew *exactly* why he'd called, "Unlike you, I have actual *work* to do."

"Let me guess - you're trying to reverse engineer the heat dump and transfer system I emailed you, right?"

The pencil *snapped* between her fingers.

"... I hate you."

That was technically more of an exaggeration than outright lie.

It wasn't that she hated David, more like, well, she despised having to rely on his expertise and knowledge to address her shortcomings. Self-hatred and loathing. She should've been able to solve the issue concerning how to properly distribute the excess heat from Endeavor's Quirk with her eyes closed. But no matter how she'd approached the problem, nothing worked. It had been so frustrating. She'd emailed David to vent. But within minutes, barely enough time to rub her temple and get coffee, he'd not only responded, but forwarded a revolutionary heat dump system he'd developed two years ago concerning another hero with a fire-based Quirk.

Something she'd never once considered despite the idea being so *simple* .

"Look, I'm just asking for a favor," his attempt at shifting the conversation crashed and burned before leaving the earth, "Nothing involving your current projects. You have my word."

The lukewarm super-sweetened coffee poured down her mouth.

"Right," invigorated by the sudden rush of caffeine and sugar, exhaustion staved for another few minutes, Nui tried sounding annoyed. She wanted to be annoyed. But spending more than an entire day working on everything from blueprints to prototypes to dealing with nonsense only a grand couturier needed to deal with had sapped her will to live, "Is that why you're asking for something illegal?"

On her screen, every pore and hair follicle on his face visible thanks to the ultra-high-definition camera, David laughed, nervously at that, "Of course not!"

"You ~threatened~ me."

"I didn't, actually."

"Is that what you call blackmail these days?"

"Now you're putting words in my mouth."

Her coffee suddenly tasted awful, as if someone dumped rotten sugar while she wasn't looking. Maybe twenty plus hours hunched over erroneous blueprints, conferencing with the regional managers, pretending she cared about company gossip and informing Madam Kiryuin on every development concerning their showcase at I-Expo while subsiding on nothing but coffee and microwaved meals wore down the edges of her mind. Or exhaustion finally overpowered the combined strength of caffeine and sugar. Whatever the case, Nui decided to finish what remained of her coffee before deigning to lower herself to David's level.

"Fine," her disheveled hair bounced gently as she began typing a department-wide email to the international division chiefs, general managers, design managers and floor managers detailing next Tuesday's meeting concerning their I-Expo showcase and itinerary,

"But if it's illegal, I'm ratting you out to Madam Kiryuin. Now, what do you want?"

"I'm sending you some notes."

Nui didn't say anything when a fifteen-gigabyte file suddenly materialized in her mailbox alongside a *ping*, "As high-order tailor, you have unfiltered access to the vast majority of the world's Quirk Registration databases," as David talked, her attention drifting elsewhere, towards something far more important than underhanded blackmail, "I was hoping you could compile a list of people whose Quirks were theoretically capable of creating something to this effect and send it to me."

That was an odd request.

But then again, he was an odd individual, bendy fingers notwithstanding.

"I'm not sure why you need access," a strand of blonde hair fell onto her face as she steadily moved the mouse across the computer towards the little box in the corner, "But I'll need to run this by Madam Kiryuin. That's not a *problem*, is it?"

"Not at all," safe and sound in his workshop, David leaned backwards in his chair, "This is just a side-project I'm conducting in my spare time," he laughed, hoping it would be enough to make her forget the last few minutes, but she wasn't fooled, "Anyway, are you attending I-Expos this year or - "

Click!

She ended the video conference before he could finish.

And after what felt like an eternity given her exhaustion, lethargy and desire to close her eyes and sleep, Nui gathered enough energy to download David's file, wait for the company security net to determine it was actually safe to open and double-clicked, "Alright," rubbing a

finger against the corner of her eye, a yawn escaped her mouth as charts, graphs, notes and information filled the screen, "Let's see what's so important..."

Chapter 33

"What's wrong, Ryuko."

"Nothing."

"Come on, you can tell me, bestie!"

"No."

"I'm sure if you tell me, you'll feel better!"

"I said it's *nothing*," at some point between fourth and sixth period, it had rained. And she knew it rained because she, one, had eyes and, two, Aizawa rescheduled outdoor training to tomorrow. It hadn't rained long, just enough to leave everything smelling faintly of mildew and burying the mugginess that had built over the last several days. The storm, brief as it was, coated Musutafu in a shimmer. Everything looked and sounded wet. But it wasn't currently raining, which was the only thing that actually mattered as rush hour slammed into the city with the weight of All Might's punch.

"Don't nothing me when I know it's more than nothing," ignorant of the dark thoughts roiling her best friend, Mako Mankanshoku leaned onto her heels, focused not on the countless cars and trucks speeding inches from the curb but something significantly more important, "You've been super grumpy since lunch. Did the principal punish you or something?"

Ryuko tried ignoring the question.

Backpack slung over her shoulder, mood somewhere south of irritation, the top of her grey jacket unbuttoned and wanting nothing more than to go home and collapse onto her bed for the foreseeable future, she impatiently watched the crosswalk change before stepping off the curb. But ignoring Mako was no less possible than brushing aside one of All Might's infamous smashes. After four

months she should've known better. Because by the time her foot touched the road and her hair stopped bouncing from the impact, Mako had already moved, "Is that why your face looks like a grumpy lemon?"

The sheer inanity - far weirder than Mako's normal weirdness - snapped her out of her funk.

"A lemon?"

"Because it's scrunched up and wrinkled like a lemon," honesty poured from Mako's heart, whether it was appropriate or not.

"It's nothing," ignoring people staring at Mako, Ryuko counted her footsteps, watching the painted lines on the street give way to concrete and sidewalk. If Mako said her face looked like a grumpy lemon, it was only because she couldn't stop thinking about what All Might told her. She shared the same Quirk with that psycho!? That was bullshit. And yet, no matter how much she wanted to scream in All Might's face, tell him he was wrong, she hadn't. She'd simply left without saying a word, ate lunch in silence while Tsuyu and Mina tried prying into why she'd been called to the principal's office and spent the rest of the day pretending nothing happened.

Yeah, she wanted to hit something, work it out of her system, but as much as wanted to deny sharing *anything* with Couturier, it made her think.

Maybe she'd been half-assing her Quirk all this time without knowing.

"I'm just thinking," but she couldn't tell Mako that, "Your mom's cooking is really something."

"That's because of her Quirk!"

The sheer enthusiasm gushing from Mako drew more unwanted attention, "Her Quirk?"

"Oh, it's nothing special. Not like yours," a cheerful sigh covered Mako's strangely wistful demeanor, which abruptly shifted right back into normal territory, "Anything she cooks with love and affection will contain all the essential vitamins and minerals! It's why her food tastes so much better than Lunch Rush's. Not that I'm picky. They're both super delicious and nutritious," as Mako talked, Ryuko nodded along. She couldn't argue with that logic. There was something special about her mom's cooking. And a Quirk explained it, "Of course, that doesn't cover calories, so I've gotta eat as much as possible whenever possible if I'm going to grow up big and strong!"

Ryuko blinked.

At some point, they'd stopped to stare into a pet store.

Or rather, Mako stopped in front of her to gush over the kittens and puppies, "And your dad?" her hand slipped further into her pocket as she dragged Mako away from the pet store before she bought something, "What about him?"

"Huh?"

Dozens of cars passed in the streets before Mako regained her train of thought and picked up where she'd left off, "Oh, dad? Yeah, his Quirk's super boring. And useless. Well, not as useless as my Quirk, but still pretty useless," planting one foot in front of the other, Mako stretched her arms, "Once dad gets started on some crazy scheme, it's impossible to change his mind. Remember last week when he picked me up from school?"

Ryuko shifted around a middle-aged, balding man with flecks of grey in his dull blue hair.

"Yeah," the city shook as somewhere in the distance, Mount Lady clashed with another villain, "He wanted All Might's autograph. Or something."

"To sell on the black market," unfazed by the distant explosion, contrary to everyone in the street with the exception of Ryuko, who merely glanced in the general direction before shrugging, Mako vigorously nodded, "But before he picked me up, I bet Shinsho he couldn't brainwash my dad," she smiled as she turned around a corner and moved away from the fighting, "You know, I thought it would work. Shinsho turning dad into a zombie, I mean. But since dad was focused on getting All Might's autograph, he'd pretty much brainwashed himself, so there was nothing for Shinso to brainwash. You know?"

The logic was sound and yet Ryuko snorted, "I bet he was annoyed."

"Who, Shinsho? Nah!" missing the point entirely, Mako waved a hand in front of her face, "He was more surprised than anything! The only other person who escaped his brainwashing was Midoriya. But he had to break a finger. Which is disturbing on so many levels."

"I meant your dad," Ryuko could feel herself crashing into that pit that was Mako's imagination. She knew Mako's dad. The guy was a creep who always had another scheme to make lots of money. The very first thing he said to her was if she was rich. But he loved Mako. And when Mako told him she was her first and bestest friend, the guy did an immediate one-eighty. Fast enough that she thought it was some sort of scam, "Bet he was pissed Shinsho tried turning him into a zombie."

"A little," Mako's eyes slowly crossed together, "But then I found a ten thousand yen note on the ground and he was happy again."

Ryuko didn't say anything because that was a very Mako thing to happen.

"Hey - Ryuko," Mako tilted her head towards the purplish clouds floating in the deepening red and orange skies, "You ever wonder if Midoriya and All Might are related?"

"Nope, the guy's single," she didn't bother thinking too deeply about the question. All Might had always been single. Something her dad pointed out once or twice, much to the hero's embarrassment, "Never had kids," that was the truth, "Or a girlfriend," but something about it irked her. All Might had *never* dated. Anyone, "Now that I think about it..."

"Then how come Midoriya's Quirk totally resembles All Might's?"

"Lots of Quirks look the same," Ryuko knew where this was going. It wasn't the first time Mako tried matching people based on Quirks. And it wouldn't be the last, "What, you gonna say Vlad King's my long-lost dad because of our Quirks?"

"... no?"

She didn't like how long it took Mako to answer.

"More like an uncle!" and there it was, Mako's brain finally catching up to reality. How she could crunch numbers without a calculator gave her a migraine, "So, Midoriya's not some secret love child All Might sent away to protect him from his enemies," Ryuko almost choked on the mental image, "Hmm, so I'm confused. If they're not father and son, what kinda Quirk is One for All?"

"One for All?" Ryuko glanced at Mako, one eyebrow higher than the other, "Where'd you hear that?"

"A few weeks ago, I fell asleep in the bathroom after helping the management course audit UA's finances. The principal wasn't too happy. Well, not until I pointed out UA could save fifty million yen every year by registering their robots as public property," Mako breathed in, "But that's not important. Well, it kinda is important to me, but not to you! Anyway! As I was saying! After I woke up on the toilet, I washed my hands and hurried home! Only because a door was locked, I had to take a detour and happened to overhear Midoriya talking to All Might in the teacher's lounge! I couldn't hear most of it, but I definitely heard All Might tell Midoriya his Quirk was

One for All. Or maybe it was All for One. I wasn't really paying attention and - what's with the lemony face, Ryuko?"

"The Three Musketeers by Alexandre Dumas, one of the greatest French authors of all time."

"You, of all people, should know better than to judge a book by its cover."

"For all you know, you might actually find it enjoyable."

One for All.

All for One.

"All for one and one for all, united we stand divided we fall."

It had to be a coincidence. It couldn't be *that* obvious, "Have you been going through my things again?"

Mako blinked, "Did you not want me to?"

Or maybe Mako borrowed her book without permission and was conflating The Three Musketeers with her overactive imagination. She didn't doubt Mako heard All Might and Izuku talking. For some inexplicable reason, the 'symbol of peace and justice' had a soft spot for Izuku a kilometer wide. But considering the time Mako believed the League of Villains was masterminded by All Might's archenemy for no other reason than it made sense in her head, or that Quirks came from aliens in space as part of some grand experiment, it was probably for the best to take everything with a mountain of salt.

"Hey, you want to hit that teriyaki place?" as they stopped at another crosswalk, cars passing left and right and someone resembling Kamui Woods jumping overhead to the scene of yet another crime somewhere across town, Ryuko braced herself, "My treat."

And yet Mako's completely expected glomp *still* almost knocked her flat onto her ass.

Chapter 34

As the eighth practical end of term exam concluded with Hagakure and Shoji capturing Snipe through clever deception and spur-of-the-moment cunning, Izuku ignored the butterflies in his stomach. Out of his sixteen classmates who already took the test, only three failed - Sero, due to falling victim to Midnight's Quirk among other reasons, and Ida and Sato. That left only Matoi and Kirishima's match against Vlad King. And once they finished, he and Kacchan were facing All Might.

The thought made him queasy.

He hated to say it, but the end of term practical exam was going to be extraordinarily difficult for more reasons than he could count. It was one thing to spar against his classmates in training. Or to fight Todoroki in the sports festival. But even if All Might no longer possessed One for All, he was still the symbol of peace and justice. He saw it every day on television when he took a break from studying. All Might stopped a runaway train or took down a dangerous street gang or happened to console a young boy whose Quirk would seriously harm anyone else without suffering a scratch. If All Might didn't hold back, the odds of him and Kacchan defeating the number one hero in the world were less than one in a billion. Which accounted for everything going perfectly and several gods or goddesses shining luck upon them.

That meant to pass the exam, they needed to ignore All Might and make a break for the exit.

Of course, the odds of Kacchan listening to him were even smaller than their chances at beating All Might.

In the aftermath of their work-studies, he might have convinced Kacchan to, well, not follow his plan but realize defeating All Might was impossible. But ever since he showed off Full Cowl, things

between them had deteriorated. Kacchan claimed he copied his moves. And while that was true, it was only because of how much he looked up to Kacchan, not because he was trying to insult him. But it wasn't like he could explain that to Kacchan. The only person whose opinion Kacchan would even consider was Ryuko's and they weren't exactly on speaking terms.

Or getting along.

"Piss off, Deku! I don't need your pity! I'm going to get stronger than everyone! Stronger than All Might and Blood Bank! Strong enough to murder that blonde psycho!"

"Huh, looks like Ryu's match is just about to start, ribbit."

He'd been so lost in his own thoughts he'd never noticed Asui and Tokoyami walking into the room.

"The property damage will most likely be catastrophic," there was a noticeable bruise on Tokoyami's beak, the result of a trick failing spectacularly against Ectoplasm.

"I don't think it'll be quite that disastrous."

The side door opened and Recovery Girl, having finished treating Ashido and Kaminari's minor cuts and bruises, neither of which measured up to their embarrassment at falling victim to the principal's strategy over and over again, slowly shambled towards the only empty chair, "I see you're feeling better," her cane tapped against the metal floor with every shuffled step, "It wouldn't take much to make that bruise go away, you know."

"It's fine," hidden by his feathers, Tokoyami blushed.

"Are you sure," one would think an old woman barely reaching his stomach possessed such an aura, but the hawk-headed hero-in-training sputtered as she approached him.

"N-No, it's fine," Tokoyami tried backpedaling, but his back was against the wall.

"Huh?"

The ninth wielder of One for All's brows furrowed, "Why isn't Ryuko wearing her support equipment?"

Arthritic bones ached as Recovery Girl finally pinned Tokoyami and deal with his minor injury before resuming her shambling march to her chair.

"Ah, the Seki Tekko. A remarkable piece of support gear, if I do say so myself," a tired sigh, more exasperation than weariness, followed, "Simple. Elegant. And keeps Matoi from ending up in my office," on screen, the doors to the training grounds opened, "And that's why the principal forbid Matoi from using them. In the real world, nobody would care about heroes using any advantage to maintain the peace, but this exam is meant to challenge you students," she had a feeling Matoi was going to end up in her office by the end of the day. Either through the girl's own actions or some combination of her stubbornness and Sekijiro's hotheadedness, "She was given a costume and that's all she can use. Pass or fail, Matoi will do so on her own merits, not because of some fancy equipment."

It was unfair.

And yet Izuku knew it made sense.

"Team Matoi and Kirishima: Practical Exam! Ready? Go!"

"Well, it's a good thing I've prepared a bed for her," if Izuku didn't know better, he would say Recovery Girl sounded annoyed, "Because this match looks to be quite the doozy."

"Team Matoi and Kirishima: Practical Exam! Ready? Go!"

"Looks like this is it."

Eijiro Kirishima was pumped. Thanks to studying his ass off, he'd walked into the three-day nightmare exam more nervous about forgetting an important date or how to do calculus than anything else. But after more than three hundred questions about math, science, literature, history and essays on how he'd apply his Quirk to six different situations, which had to be a joke because All Might asked that same question in April, he was finally ready to cut loose! No more filling in the bubbles or short answers. This was an opportunity to earn a high score. And with Matoi as his partner, no way he'd fail!

"We better get moving."

The training ground wasn't exactly familiar. Hell, it looked like the neighborhood around his old school. Ground Delta. That's what Mister Aizawa had called it, "No telling when this guy's going to surprise us."

Instead of picking up the pace or acting anything remotely approaching worried, Ryuko opened her mouth and yawned.

It started approximately the same time Aizawa, in his infinite wisdom, announced the teams and which teacher they had the 'delight' of fighting. Half the class was shocked. The other half surprised. But her? She couldn't have possibly cared less. Because it wasn't surprising. She'd figured UA wouldn't go with cheap-ass robots as the final exam. Or, if they did, it wouldn't be something straightforward. It'd be stupid, like hunt down and destroy specific robots as teams. That was fine. What *wasn't* fine was the principal cheerfully announcing in front of everyone she wasn't allowed to use the Seki Tekko. That was the point her mood soured.

And All Might agreeing with the mouse without having the decency to look her in the eye hadn't helped.

At all .

A method of testing the true limits of her Quirk? Get over yourself! She wasn't born yesterday. And the principal's explanation - oh, she was forbidden from using anything than UA's provided costume because it would pose an unfair advantage over the other students - reminded her of her dad. And not in a good way. Because that annoying filibuster could best be summed as 'I know it's not fair, you know it's not fair, we all know it's not fair, but I'm in charge, so shut up and deal with it.'

"Cool your jets."

And the heat wasn't helping.

She didn't know if Endeavor was in town or the world simply hated her, but the late spring heat wave was unbearable.

Which was a small but important reason they were sticking to the back alleys, "Ain't no point rushing into a trap."

"A trap?" having taken point through no fault of her own, mostly because she didn't care that much to speak up in her defense, Kirishima looked over his shoulder, "You serious?"

"It's what I'd do," one hand buried in her pocket, she slumped around Kirishima heedless of any possible trap, "This isn't some practice test. If we're gonna win, we gotta think outside the box," nobody expected the teachers to charge them as soon as the test started. That would be cheap and unfair. Which is why she expected All Might to pull off something stupid against Izuku and Bakugo. Because the guy was an asshole, "Which is why I'm plannin' on triggering it."

Kirishima stared at her like she'd grown another head.

"Villains are cheap-ass bitches. They ain't gonna fight fairly and they're not gonna play on your terms," the more she talked about it,

the more Ryuko found herself remembering that blonde psycho's pet crashing her dinner with Rumi in the middle of a busy street, "You want to win, you gotta throw out the rules and force the villains to improvise," and that pissed her off, "But this guy's less than a cheap-ass. He's a wannabe cheap-ass playing pretend. No way he knows how a real villain talks or thinks."

Not for the first time, and certain not the last, Kirishima couldn't help but compare Matoi with Bakugo.

They even had the same grin, "So, we're going to be the villains?"

"Yup," Ryuko snorted, "The principal said we gotta escape or kick ass if want to win, right?" her skirt, the piece of costume hanging over her leggings, fluttered in the breeze, "I didn't hear any rules about turning the rules on their goddamn head."

"Yeah, but still..."

Kirishima tried, but thinking wasn't one of his strong suits, which was probably why Matoi had shot down his strategy of 'capturing Vlad King for a high score.'

"You sure this'll work?" that her smile didn't fade only made him feel worse, "I mean, you trained with the guy. Won't he, uh, you know, expect you to pull a stunt like this?"

She almost stopped walking.

Then rolled her eyes.

"It wasn't exactly training," calling what she did 'training' was like saying Aizawa had a sense of humor, "More like..." she thought about it for a moment, "... getting punched over and over until I figured out his stupid move," that was an exaggeration. Vlad hadn't punched her. He hadn't touched her. At all. He'd yelled in her face, shouted about how taking shortcuts was wrong and demanded she

do everything by the book. It was irritating, annoying and above everything else, productive as hell, "Wouldn't recommend it."

"Geez," as he bought her story hook, line and sinker, Kirishima looked like he'd swallowed a lemon, "And here I thought our teacher was nuts."

"Aw, don't tell me you're nervous."

Her grin widened into a broad smile as Kirishima sputtered. Which she ignored. She had nothing against the guy. She didn't exactly know him. Come to think of it, she really didn't know half the people in her class other than their names and what functioned as basic estimates of their Quirks. And by that, she meant hang out after school or study together or have any social interactions. It wasn't that she didn't care. It was simply that she *really* didn't care. She wasn't at UA to make friends. If she happened to make friends along the way, great, but she wasn't going to take the initiative.

Not even if her life depended on it.

"Don't worry," shooting her partner another shit-eating grin, just to drive home the point, she casually slapped his back, "Everybody freezes the first time they face villains."

She counted down from ten.

By the time she reached six, Kirishima finally realized what she'd implied.

"HEY!"

He was indignant. He was embarrassed. And he was talking to nobody since she'd kept walking while his brain played catch up, "Look, I get it, you fought actual villains," there was a blind corner between the houses. A sharp turn in the street making it impossible to see anybody coming, "But so have I!" muscles and skin

transformed into solid rock with nothing more than intent and a snap of his arm, "I'm not the same person you remember!"

Ryuko wanted to frown.

But mostly she felt confusion.

"Good to know," a cool warmth trickled down her spine, pooled in the pit of her stomach and extended down her arms and legs, "Next time that blonde psycho shows her ugly face, I'll give you first shot at her. Sound good?"

Instead of coming up with some brave retort or a declaration that he wasn't afraid of anything, Kirishima went pale.

"Hmph, thought so."

As her partner for the day's mind took more than a minute to reboot itself, Ryuko shrugged her shoulder. Blood, viscous as the first time she used her quirk, crimson in the afternoon sunlight and smelling faintly of copper. The liquid undulated to music only she could hear. It flowed through her costume's semipermeable fabric as easily as water, curling upon itself in thick streams and rivulets, "Now, if you're done complaining, here's the plan," a little over three liters curled between her fingers, "Unless you feel like eating dirt, charging like an ass ain't gonna work," and faster than a drop of rain fell from her nose onto the ground, all that blood erupted into a blade, "Which is why you and me are gonna cheat."

Cheat.

There was something wrong about that word, "What are you talking about? Mister Aizawa's probably watching us! If we cheat, we're going to get expelled!"

Ryuko scratched her neck.

"I didn't mean *cheat* cheat," that she needed to explain the difference because cheating, which this wasn't, and exploiting her knowledge of Vlad King's Quirk, which it was, was more than enough to destroy her good mood, "Give me some credit! I'm saying since I know how Vlad's Quirk works, we can use that to our advantage!"

"... oh, right. Sorry."

Oh, right?

Was that all he could say?

Leaving the alley behind, Ryuko stepped onto the main street through Ground Delta, "The guy acts like he has a bigger ego than Bakugo, but it's an act. He ain't nearly as stubborn as he looks. But he can't do two things at once. You see blood, any blood? Hit him hard and fast. Don't hold anything back. Hell, kick him in the balls. Take him down before he gets the chance to switch gears."

"YOU THINK I'LL GIVE YOU THE CHANCE TO EXPLOIT AN OPENING!?"

Emerging from the mid-afternoon haze by *jumping* off a nearby building, Vlad King landed in front of them, his bright red costume standing out more than anything, "IF YOU BELIEVE THAT, YOU'VE ALREADY FAILED!"

"Great, he found us," Kirishima snapped his arms, flesh transforming into jagged rock, "Guess Plan A's out."

"You sound quite confident in your abilities, Matoi," having calmed down from his initial exuberance, Sekijiro ignored the weights heavy enough to drive a lesser man or woman onto their hands and knees, "If you truly believe you can kick my ass, then by all means, try," blood pumped through his arteries and veins, delivering oxygen and adrenaline to eager and waiting muscles, "But don't expect me to make it easy."

"Big talk comin' from a guy wearing handicaps."

As the dust settled and her hair stopped fluttering in the wake of Vlad's landing, Ryuko smirked. How much weight was he wearing? At least seventy kilograms. Maybe more, "Or are those ugly bracelets some kind of fashion cry for help?"

Vlad King was fast.

But he wasn't as fast as Couturier.

And that made all the difference.

Because after doing her goddamn best to hit someone who went out of their way to slow down just enough to make it *seem* like she could kill her, a guy moving as fast as a train just didn't have the same impact. She recognized his posture. Noticed the subtle expansion of his muscles. Even down the street, far enough that his face was slightly fuzzy, she noticed his veins momentarily bulge during his introduction. Anyone else would probably have overlooked these things. Hell, she was pretty sure Kirishima noticed crap. But while purposely and deliberately taunting the bastard, Ryuko tightened her grip, shifted her left foot inwards and *swung* just as Vlad King kicked off the street.

BOOM!

As soon as Vlad King's knuckles smashed into her sword, it felt as if she'd tried punching All Might only for the hero to punch back.

And *hard* .

At some point, he must've kicked Kirishima, because her partner was in front of her one moment and behind her the next.

But she was more focused on the freaking comet punch.

"Did you believe I'd hold back, Matoi!?"

His bicep quivered as blood stilled through pulsating arteries. Veins bulged beneath the crimson fabric of his skin-tight costume. More than a head taller than her and at least seventy kilograms heavier, plus the additional weight from Mei Hatsume's bracelets, Vlad King nevertheless didn't relent, "If you did, then you're as foolish as you look!"

"SHUT... GAH... UP!"

While the bloody asshole talked and bragged and somehow sounded like a teacher giving a lecture while comet punching her with the force of a freight train, Ryuko's head rang from the impact. A deafening note that drowned everything else, including her own thoughts. As muscles empowered by blood struggled against manifested life essence, her lips retreated into a snarl, spit dribbling from the corners, "AND... QUIT... LECTURING... ME!"

She heard Vlad King talk.

His mouth was moving.

But she didn't care.

Sweat poured down her face, whether from the sweltering heat or her boiling blood she didn't know. And didn't care. With one hand holding her sword, she propped the other upon the edge, armored fingers digging into ultra-hardened blood as if it were putty. Her arms burned, her jaw hurt and every muscle in her body was creaking from the strain. Ryuko could feel every desperate beating of her heart. A loud *bum-bum*. One knee trembled inches from the ground. Her other foot slid backwards, struggling to keep some semblance of balance as she resisted the urge to pour even more blood into the problem. But this was nothing! She could beat him! There was no way Vlad was as strong as Couturier!

No way he was stronger!

"You think I'm weaker than the villain who killed your father? Think again!"

Her thoughts ground to a halt when Vlad's other hand wrapped around her neck.

"Just because I pull my punches, doesn't mean I'm weak," he squeezed hard enough that she gasped, right before he slammed her headfirst into the ground, "You might have learned my move, Matoi, but don't think for a moment that means you've mastered it!"

Through bleary eyes, she saw Kirishima attempt to do something.

But by the time her partner leapt into action, Vlad King had picked her off the ground, spun around and launched sideways her down the street.

Chapter 35

Author's Note: It's been asked, but you can find the up-to-date story (with a grand total of 101 chapters as of uploading this) over on spacebattles.

My Bloody Academia

A minute had passed since Matoi's ejection.

Sixty seconds to come to grips with the difference between himself and Mister Vlad King.

"RRAAAAAGGGH!"

Anyone else would have been flummoxed, which was a word he'd picked up from Yaoyorozu.

But the opportunity to seriously throw down with someone stronger than him was an opportunity he couldn't pass up!

CRASH!

"Is this seriously the best you have to offer?"

Following his expulsion of Matoi, Sekijiro Kan quickly restrained himself. Instead of launching an all-out assault, he'd held himself back, allowing the teen to gather his wits, formulate some form of strategy and hold his ground. Yet it appeared Kirishima was as hard-headed as Tetsutetsu, "I'm disappointed," consecutively stronger punches rained upon the bulwark of hardened blood blossoming from his vambrace like flowers. Crosses, hooks, jabs and uppercuts. Even a few boxing moves he hadn't expected. Each attack cracked his aegis, every strike pushed deeper, forcing him to exert more and more energy to repair the damage. At the current pace, in a matter of

minutes, he'd need to gather his breath, "I expected more from the hero calling himself Red Riot."

Kirishima wanted to tell Vlad King to go to hell.

But he couldn't do that until he actually landed a punch on the guy.

"Give it a rest, would ya?" shaking away the soreness building in his fingers, the hotheaded teen backpedaled, sweat creeping between contours of hardened skin and muscle, "Your reverse psycho mumbo jumbo isn't going to work on me."

"Is that so?"

Aware of movement in the distance, Sekijiro lowered his arm, "Then perhaps it's time we take things up another notch."

Through the visor provided by his costume, dark red eyes subtly narrowed. Although lacking Matoi's grace and fine control, he did not need anything more than to desire change for every square inch of his makeshift shield to simultaneously liquify, return to its normal state and flow through the openings in his gloves. The crimson tidal wave achieved its intended purpose, distracting the hotheaded student. In seconds, every drop of blood was back where it belonged. Beneath the midday sun, sweating profusely thanks to spandex, high-weight bracelets and simply because it was that goddamn hot, Sekijiro waited until Kirishima was prepared before charging forward not as fast as he'd moved against Matoi, but fast enough to make the difference meaningless.

His first punch missed - a straight jab to the solar plexus - signifying the hero-in-training learned at least one lesson from Matoi's overconfidence and bravado.

But the uppercut to Kirishima's stomach after deftly avoiding a haphazard yet dangerous counterattack was more than sufficient to knock the wind out of the teenager's sails.

And send him crashing into the nearest wall.

"You have potential," a lack of surprise adorned the hero's gruff façade when Kirishima recovered quicker than anticipated, leapt back onto his feet, spat out a mixture of spittle and blood from biting his cheek, and charged forth. All while roaring at the utmost top of his lungs, "But you're too straightforward," instead of countering the telegraphed punch, Sekijiro leaned sideways, waited until Kirishima overextended himself, grabbed the boy by his throat and *slammed* him back into the wall already bearing his silhouette, "I can see your moves coming from a mile away."

Head ringing from the impact and a cool warmth trickling from his hairline near the scar above his eyebrow, Kirishima swung his legs and *stomped* the older hero square in the chest.

As hard as he could.

Several times.

Until Vlad King finally let go.

"So what..." taking a moment to catch his breath, Kirishima rubbed his throat, "... so what if you can read me like an open book!" he wiped a hand against his mouth, painting a streak of crimson on hardened flesh. This was the guy who trained Ryuko? Damn, no wonder she was so strong. If he had a bastard like Vlad King personally beating the shit out of him, he'd be freaking tough, "As long as I can hit you, it doesn't matter how straightforward I am!"

It was going to seriously suck in the morning, but forcing his Quirk to harden and strengthen every inch of his body, Kirishima charged the hero, arm cocked over his shoulder.

A punch Vlad King caught with barely a grunt.

"On the contrary - "

Both of their arms quivered, yet it was the naïve student and not the experienced hero whose expectations immediately crashed and burned, " - it's a matter of life and death."

A fist planted itself into Kirishima's stomach.

Followed by a knee to the underside of his chin.

All culminating in the hero grabbing his face and smashing him head-first into an empty two-story single-family home.

"Therefore, allow me to give you some friendly advice," holding the teenager more than a foot above the ground, Sekijiro barely acknowledged Kirishima's struggles as blood gushed from his vambraces, "From what I've gathered, your Quirk hardens your body, significantly increasing your physical strength and endurance," far more blood than Matoi could produce in her lifetime or several lifetimes, enveloped the student before hardening into an inescapable prison, "But that power means nothing without the intelligence to properly utilize it!"

It was finished.

Yet Sekijiro refused to allow himself the courtesy of breathing a sigh of relief.

He might have incapacitated Kirishima, but the battle wasn't over.

She approached from the direction he'd thrown her, walking unencumbered despite crashing through the side of a single-family domicile. Her footsteps were soft, yet burdened with purpose. And she appeared, from an impartial perspective, rather annoyed. Or perhaps 'pissed' better fit her description, "I'm disappointed, Matoi," a growl forced its way from the depths of his chest. Feigned arrogance wasn't difficult to accomplish. Not when he was genuinely disappointed, "You had *three hours* to devise a strategy," he yanked his hand away from Kirishima's bloody prison, leaving him free to glare at the perpetually angry girl, "Yet your partner was almost

completely in the dark about my Quirk and abilities. If this were a real battle, your reckless disregard could have killed someone!"

"Ugh..."

Contrary to his expectations, Matoi's annoyance wasn't directed at him, "How the hell did he capture you?"

Ryuko stared at Kirishima with noticeable frustration, refusing to acknowledge Vlad King in any way, shape or form. One eyebrow twitched, the other settling into what could only be called consternation. Her chin was cut deep enough that it dribbled blood onto her costume. There was another cut on her cheek. Somewhere in her hairline, blood flowed from yet another wound, trickling down her face and separating on the bridge of her nose. The right half of her costume was tattered and torn from crashing through several walls, sliding on asphalt and slamming through the front door of another empty house. She favored her left side, no because of some painful injury or sprained ankle, but to help distribute the weight from the enormous axe resting on her shoulder.

A dangerous and vicious-looking weapon about half the size of the one she'd swung forever ago.

"Don't worry about me," Kirishima might've been trapped by Vlad King's Quirk, but that wasn't enough to stop him from trying to escape, "Get out of here! As long as one of us gets to the exit, we'll both pass!"

"Tch," her eyes snapped back to Vlad King, "If I wanted your advice, I'd ask for it."

It might've been the four or so liters of blood resting on her shoulder or a concussion from crashing through more than a single house, but Ryuko didn't like how long she was thinking about running. This was a test. And despite his bombastic, over-the-top, weekend morning cartoonish villain attitude that made her cringe every time he opened his mouth, Vlad King wasn't a pushover. He was strong. Nowhere

close to Couturier's bullshit power, but getting those stupid cuffs on him would be far more trouble than it was worth. If she listened and turned tail, Kirishima wasn't going to die. Aizawa would probably say he was disappointed. But this was a *test* . The only thing that mattered was passing.

But her decision to fight or run never passed the planning stages.

"Go ahead, Matoi. Run away."

Because at the same moment she'd decided to make a break for the exit, Vlad King overplayed his hand, "But what about your partner? Are you willing to leave your ally to the hands of a villain to escape?" something close to a glower pulled on the teacher's chiseled jaw, "I thought you were better than that, but it seems I was wrong."

Acidic bile rose in the pit of her stomach.

Ryuko knew what he was doing.

But that didn't stop her from being *pissed* .

"First - screw you," despite the darkness gnawing at her thoughts, Ryuko lifted the axe off her shoulder, "And second," chapped lips twisted into a snarl as unadulterated annoyance filtered through her soul, "You're not in any position to talk shit! As long as *he's* - " she snorted at Kirishima, " - stuck like that, you're a sitting duck!"

Her weapon on choice undulated, every inch of the blade and handle liquefying until enough blood to paint the street red floated around her fingers, halted from splattering over the ground by nothing more than her Quirk. The taste of bile rose up her throat. The encroaching darkness retreated as three liters of blood passed through her costume, filtering through her skin and returning to her arteries and veins, providing a sudden rise in her blood pressure. Which left only three-quarters of a liter hovering around outstretched fingers.

How she knew the exact volume probably had something to do with her Quirk.

"And that means," Ryuko smirked, purely for the hell of it, as the remaining blood condensed into a small marble, "There's no way you're gonna enjoy what's coming!"

"Don't **test** me, Matoi."

A villain did not address her by name.

"You so much as fire that in my general direction and you'll be expelled before the day's over," not amused by the presumed threat, Sekijiro growled.

"Geez, aren't you cranky?" it was different from the normal Armor-Piercing Blood Bullet, a name she thought was awesome no matter how many times Mina or Toru said it could use some work. Thrusting her palm towards Vlad King, who reacted by tensing, her smirk developed into a full-blown grin, "I didn't forget what you said," and when she suddenly decided to aim downwards instead of forward, she watched the guy's face turn an amazing shade of bright crimson, "BUT YOU NEVER SAID ANYTHING ABOUT HITTING NOTHING!"

BOOM!

Sekijiro realized a moment too late what Matoi had been planning.

It was devious.

It was underhanded.

And worse of all, it was brilliant.

As a hero, he was privy to a lot of things. He'd witnessed actions that defied physics itself. And fought against villains capable of harnessing their Quirks to such degrees that he would call it unnatural. When Matoi released the small yet deadly orb of blood, nearly a liter condensed into a space smaller than a marble, there

was a moment when the world appeared to stop. Time froze as the projectile crossed a distance of less than two feet faster than a genuine bullet. And when it penetrated the ground, traveling deep enough to reach the fake sewers the principal installed for authenticity, the sheer force liquefied asphalt. Pavement buckled around Matoi, rising and falling like waves on the ocean. Followed by a deafening *boom* as the atmosphere was forcibly expunged only to immediately crash inwards and rebound a second time.

The precision and control necessary for Matoi pull such a dangerous stunt was mind boggling.

As acrid smoke washed over Ground Delta, obscuring everything in a haze of brown, grey and black visible from the parking lot outside the facility, he covered his mouth, "You think you're quite clever, don't you?"

In all honesty, this was an infuriatingly clever tactic.

He should have known better than to presume Matoi wouldn't exploit a loophole in his orders, "But a smokescreen doesn't work without targeting the eyes!"

A shadow in the darkness.

He lashed out with a barely restrained haymaker, intent on ending this charade before she pushed herself too far and injured herself.

Only it wasn't Matoi.

It was the top half of her costume.

Floating mid-step behind the genuinely stunned teacher, Ryuko wore a frown that could've soured milk. Naked from the waist up except for a sports bra and bruises her costume had concealed. Well-toned abs stood out. Defined muscular not to the same extent as Kirishima, Bakugo or Izuku, but far more developed than any other girl in her year with the singular exception of Kendo, propelled her into

position. Disheveled hair caked with blood and whatever composed the noxious smog clinging to the ground appeared to move. Locks of navy blue chaotically fluttered as crimson spread from the bang hovering over her left eye. Deep red saturated her hair, spreading root to root, bang to bang, until every strand shimmered.

"Looking for me?"

A hint of pain hugged her voice.

Inside her body, every drop of blood ignored the natural order of things. Twenty-seven liters danced to her specific demands, delivering oxygen and adrenaline to muscles struggling to not tear themselves apart. A speckle of blood dribbled from the corner of her mouth. Multiple cuts opened on her shoulders and arms and stomach. Blood spewed onto the street as she focused everything into pulling off a single punch. Her heart felt like it was literally on fire. Every heartbeat sent waves of pain crashing against her mind.

This wasn't Vlad King's move.

This was her *improvement* on his move.

Everything moved in slow motion - the smoke, Vlad King recalling the blood trapping Kirishima against the wall, everything.

But it was too late.

He was too *slow* .

Body on fire, blood burning and heart struggling to keep pace, Ryuko clenched her fingers, crimson bursting between white-knuckled joints, sucked in a deep breath and *roared* .

"BLOODY OVERDRIVE!"

Chapter 36

Author's Note: You can find the up-to-date story over on [spacebattles](#).

My Bloody Academia

"I thought I'd find you here."

Yagi Toshinori had questions, not simply for himself, but concerning Aizawa's appearance as the latter shuffled through the door to the teacher's prep room. A door far enough away from the general staging area that the chances of a student taking a wrong turn and stumbling upon his true form were slim to none. The other teachers hadn't returned, either due to writing their initial evaluations or other reasons he couldn't quite remember. He was alone. Which was good and bad. Good because it provided with peace and quiet. Bad because it left him alone with his thoughts and doubts. Such as how the hell could he test Midoriya and Bakugo without holding back a considerable amount of his power.

And by considerable, he meant pretty much everything.

"Oh, hey," his disheveled appearance, made worse by the deflated costume hanging onto his skeletal features through luck, practice and careful stitching, only added to the confusion building in the prep room. Not necessarily at his upcoming evaluation. Well, that was part of the problem. A rather large part. Yet when Aizawa walked through the door, he couldn't help but notice the guy's singed clothes, torn scarf and soot-covered face with distinctive clean spots around his eyes. As if he'd stood point-blank in the middle of an explosion, "Just finishing up a few things before heading out."

Of course, he could take a hint.

Aizawa's expression, or lack thereof, suggested he didn't want to talk about what happened.

Although he had a pretty good idea it involved Todoroki and Yaoyorozu.

"Really?"

At the question, or whatever passed as a question considering Aizawa didn't seem keen on pressing the issue, Toshinori sat back in the oversized chair and sighed.

"I'd originally planned on behaving like a supervillain. You know, act as an unstoppable force. Something Midoriya and Bakugo couldn't overcome through sheer force," a lanky finger tapped against the table, "I still do... it's just... I never expected being a teacher would be so difficult," the emaciated hero's sunken eyes narrowed, "I guess it's just something I'll need to get used to," unaware that Aizawa's respect for him was reaching depths previously believed impossible, he rubbed his neck, "What brings you here?"

"Lunch."

The exhausted hero pointed towards the refrigerator.

"Right," as Aizawa committed several tasks with the energy of a singular motion - shuffling across the prep room, removing a plastic-wrapped bowl from the middle shelf of the fridge and dumping it into the microwave - Toshinori coughed, "I've been meaning to ask. It's one thing to hear the results, who passed and failed, but I haven't been able to actually *watch* anything. Not from this room," he mentally winced, fingers rubbing together and long-calloused skin making itself known, "How did Yaoyorozu and Todoroki do?"

Ding!

"They passed."

Using his scarf as makeshift gloves, Aizawa examined his lunch. Steam wafted from the container. A gentle wisp of white smoke carrying an unmistakable smell, "Assuming, of course, the committee accepts my field evaluation report," the first bite burnt his tongue. As did the second and third. But he couldn't muster the passion to care. This was his lunch. And he was starving, "Not that it's any of my business," the slightest twitch of his cheek implied he *had* seen the list of hammy villainous one-liners All Might shuffled underneath a stack of papers. Something he ignored to maintain his sanity, "But it wouldn't kill you to show your face around the students."

Toshinori grimaced, weary eyes shifting towards the high-density weights stacked in the corner of the room.

"I wish I could."

More than anything in the world, he wanted to do exactly that, not just for Midoriya, but for the rest of the students of Class 1-A and 1-B.

But since passing the torch to Midoriya, One For All's remaining embers had been fading faster and faster. He barely had fifty minutes in his muscle form. On a good day, he might be able to push an hour. Maybe seventy minutes. But he'd already wasted fifteen minutes showing off during the principal's introduction. Any unnecessary time spent as All Might risked reverting to his normal appearance in the middle of Bakugo and Midoriya's exam, "But I need to conserve my strength."

What was it Isshin once told him?

Expect the unexpected because things never quite go the way you want them?

Or something.

On the morning he'd bestowed Midoriya with the collective hopes of every previous wielder who'd inherited One For All, he'd assumed

the boy's time at UA would be uneventful. A boring three years. There would be villains, of course. Criminals he wouldn't allow roam the streets. But enough time to teach Midoriya how to properly utilize One For All before the last embers faded into darkness.

But the League of Villains and the bastard controlling them from the shadows changed everything.

"Then you should probably eat something," unaware of the other hero's thoughts, Aizawa offered his lunch, "Want some?"

"Err, no thanks," Toshinori made an effort to politely refuse, but couldn't hide the nausea turning his features green, "Anyway, how are things going? Any surprises?"

"What do you call a surprise?" Aizawa asked, to no real surprise, "If you're asking if someone failed who I thought would pass, I'd say Cementoss capturing Ida and Sato counts."

"I heard about that," the seemingly starved symbol of peace's sunken eyes settled into a frown, "I never expected someone like Ida to fail."

"It's complicated," halfway through his lunch, Aizawa finished chewing before answering, "Ida was well on his way towards the escape gate when Cementoss managed to ensnare his teammate. He could've kept going. There was nothing stopping him. If he'd simply walked through the gate, he and Sato would've both passed. Instead, he turned around and briefly managed to free Sato before they both were captured," he took another bite, "He's taking his loss in stride, though. Sure, he's upset, but Ida firmly believes he made the right choice."

"Can't say I wouldn't have done the same thing," Toshinori nodded, "Any other surprises?"

"Ashido and Kaminari also failed."

Toshinori didn't need an explanation for that, "The principal certainly doesn't do things half-measured," he grimaced. One of the smartest minds on the planet against two first-year students struggling to maintain a decent grade point average. Still, knowledge and intelligence, which explained Nezu requesting Ground Gamma as the site of the exam, "He must've enjoyed toying with them."

He looked at the clock on the wall.

Ten minutes since Ryuko and Kirishima's exam started.

"Well, I suppose I should get ready," bracing himself, he stood up and immediately put on another four hundred pounds of raw muscle, bulking enough that his costume formed itself to the general curvature of his physique, "It would be insulting not to arrive promptly, after all," he grabbed one of the high-density weights young Hatsume made. An additional two tons wasn't easy, but as he snapped the bracelets into place, grimacing only at how heavy they were, he smiled, "And you needn't worry. Even if I do have a soft spot towards young Midoriya, I won't pull my punches. I'll treat him as I'd treat any villain. Err, well, considering the situation, I'd treat him as I'd treat any hero if I were a vile and underhanded villain."

If he was comforted by that, Aizawa barely budged, "Why does that not reassure - "

Bzzz! Bzzz! Bzzz!

"Hold on," reaching into his scarf, he extracted a phone, "Yes?" as soon as he raised it to his ear, his voice hardened, "Wait, she did what? I see. Well, thanks for the heads up."

Beep!

"That was Recovery Girl."

A certain sense of looming annoyance clung to the erasing hero's existence, "It appears Matoi 'improved' Vlad's Blood Tempo."

"Did she now?"

Stroking his chiseled jaw with fingers large enough to pitch Aizawa's lunch, All Might's entire posture radiated bewilderment and pride. Every teacher at UA and most pros were quite aware of Blood Tempo. It was an ingenious technique. There were shortcomings, of course. Every technique had shortcomings. But for Ryuko to build upon such a difficult technique in such a short amount of time was quite the accomplishment, "Say, what's wrong? Surely this is good news! It took Vlad a couple of months to develop that move. And another year to master it!"

Aizawa would've erased All Might's Quirk if doing so wouldn't immediately and painfully crush the number one hero.

"The problem is Matoi lacks patience."

How the symbol of peace could fail to miss the point so thoroughly had to be a natural talent.

Or an aspect of his Quirk.

"Not to say she hasn't improved since the sports festival, but she's far too willing to take unnecessary risks without considering the consequences," tired eyes glared into the remains of his lunch. He couldn't deny Matoi was brilliant. Or that she'd appreciably changed since their heart-to-heart conversation. But she was still his third-most problematic student. Not because of insubordination or inability to appreciate physical boundaries, but her single-minded obsession to bring Couturier to whatever she deemed justice, "Eventually, something goes horribly wrong."

The broad smile never missing from All Might's face struggled maintaining itself, "Is she alright?"

"Don't know," Aizawa tossed the empty tubber ware into the sink, "Whatever stunt she pulled, judging from Recovery Girl's tone, she might have killed herself."

"WHAT!?"

"Relax. I'm kidding," he might have gone overboard, but pulling one over the infamous symbol of peace and justice was simply too good of an opportunity to ignore, "What, you think I'd be this relaxed if one of my students were in serious trouble?" grinning a toothy smile, he jabbed a thumb over his shoulder, "She's on her way back. Which means it's about time you got ready," and like that, his smile was smothered by general exhaustion, "And *please* try holding back. The last thing UA needs is a lawsuit because All Might crippled a student."

All Might smiled, because he needed to smile, as Aizawa left the room.

"Geez."

A hint of his normal personality bled through his public façade, "That guy seriously has a terrible sense of humor."

My Bloody Academia

She preferred punching over stabbing.

The reason wasn't complicated.

Sure, she could harden her blood into whatever she wanted. And make it sharp enough to cut through almost anything. But there was just something *exhilarating* about grinding her knuckles into someone's face and feeling cartilage shatter under the pressure while their perspective on being a villain painfully crashed and burned. Maybe it was her Quirk. Maybe it gave her a short temper. Or whatever. But it wasn't like she went out of her way looking for fights. Every scrap she'd had since elementary school had been someone else deciding to pick a fight. Those uptight spoiled bitches at Seiai, the bullies on the playground and that teenage moron who'd

mocked her hair. If someone wanted to throw down, she was more than happy to test the limits of their convictions.

Some people thought she had an anger problem.

They could kiss her ass.

She didn't *have* an anger problem, she had a problem with jackasses who looked down on anyone different from them.

"BLOODY OVERDRIVE!"

Her decision to throw everything into a single punch aimed at Vlad King's face had nothing to do with any of that.

It wasn't that personal.

When she'd rolled out of bed earlier that morning, faceplanting onto the floor as a half-asleep menagerie of limbs, blankets and pillows, field testing Bloody Overdrive hadn't crossed her mind. Breakfast. Bacon, eggs, cereal and anything else she could stuff in her mouth. That was the only thing she'd cared about until leaving her apartment. Bloody Overdrive was meant to be a secret. Her ace in the hole. A move specifically designed to overpower Couturier's bullshit speed. It didn't matter how sharp her blood could get if she couldn't hit the psycho bitch. But catching the villain was only part of the problem. Figuring out how to turn off the freak's regeneration was going to take a whole lot of imagination. Or not. Because if she learned anything from her work-study, it was that hitting something hard and fast enough fixed all of life's problems.

Which meant instead of coming up with some fancy technique, she just needed to hit Couturier until her regeneration short-circuited.

"... gah!"

As her blood boiled and burned, air *swooped* around Ryuko's knuckles. Moisture evaporated against the heat radiating off her skin,

transforming into billowing clouds gently caressing against her face. Something in her shoulder twitched, sending another burst of pain alongside the rest. Her pulse surpassed two hundred beats per minute, struggling to supply every muscle with enough oxygen. Blood splattered on the ground, gushing out of cuts and gashes spontaneously appearing everywhere on her body. Even without looking, Ryuko couldn't help but see the vermilion glow in her hair, brighter and more widespread than at any other point in her life. Through half-lidded eyes, lips pulled back into a bloodied snarl and her entire arm quivering with energy, she watched Vlad King turn around in slow motion.

He couldn't stop her.

Just a little more and he'd be down for the count.

And then she stopped.

It was a generally accepted rule that other than Quirks and their unnatural bullshit, energy couldn't be destroyed, merely transformed into something else.

So, when she stopped, all that energy had to go somewhere.

And somewhere it *did* go.

Pain exploded down her arm like fireworks, slamming against her fingers and wrist and elbow and shoulder. In that order. Not the pain of a broken arm. She *knew* that pain. This was the type of pain coming from hitting something really hard - like All Might's stupid abs - and expecting nothing. She wanted to gasp. Her body wanted to gasp. But she angrily chewed her lip and forced herself to say nothing as the rest of the energy was released into a shockwave. An unexpected shockwave. Windows on nearby houses trembled. Every tree in the neighborhood swayed. The noxious cloud of dust clinging to the ground was scattered down the street in the direction of her punch.

"Surprised?"

Her voice was raw, almost as if she'd gargled salt, "Don't tell me you actually thought I'd break your face over some half-assed insult," blood dripped from her chin. She coughed. She wheezed. Her body felt like it was on fire. And it was taking every ounce of concentration to not gloat, "Get over yourself."

Vlad King wasn't talking.

In fact, he wasn't moving.

The shockwave had not only swept his hair into an embarrassing shape, it also knocked off his stupid visor.

Click!

He didn't do anything until Kirishima snapped the handcuffs around his wrist.

"Team Kirishima and Matoi have passed the finals!"

And even then it took the teacher a moment for his mind to catch up to reality.

"Damn," holding a hand to his forehead, as soon as the announcer declared the exam over, Kirishima stared down the street, "You pulled an All Might."

Something in the deepest, darkest corner of her soul revolted.

The pain faded.

And what emerged was less of a question and more of a demand for clarification, "Huh?"

But her question went unanswered, because acting as though nothing happened, especially nearly getting punched into next week by a student he'd pissed to the point she'd stopped holding back,

Vlad King made an effort to fix his hair. A foolish effort, but a determined effort nevertheless despite its reluctance to resume its previous shape, "Congratulations," his voice actually squeaked, which he quickly buried beneath a dramatic cough bordering on testosterone poisoning, "Far be it for me to deny credit where credit is due, the both of you displayed remarkable aptitude and tenacity. As heroes, you must know when to fight a villain or retreat and gather reinforcements. It's not an easy call. More than one hero died on the line of duty making a wrong choice. And far too many heroes perished because they overestimated their abilities and underestimated their opponents."

A wracking cough came from Matoi.

But whether it was from the strain of pushing her Quirk to the breaking point or annoyance, Sekijiro didn't know.

"Which is why I must also apologize," it was the mark of a good hero to accept one's faults and to admit when they'd made a mistake, "Some of the things I said were completely out of line. In my attempt to motivate you into doing the best you could, I crossed a line. And for that, I'm sorry."

"Whatevs."

Ryuko glanced away, "I knew you were screwing around," her arm felt like shit. Not broken, but sore enough that thinking about moving a finger made everything hurt, "But, ugh, it's fine, I guess."

She was tired.

She was exhausted.

And she was starving.

"Not so fast."

It was annoying how he knew what she was going to do before her body even moved. She'd barely turned around, facing the general direction of the escape gate, when Vlad had the courtesy of grabbing her good shoulder, "We need to talk."

"... I'm fine."

"Oh, really?" the older hero's eyes narrowed, "Then try pulling away. If you can do that, I'll drop the subject."

She didn't.

She *couldn't* .

And that was enough proof for him to keep talking, "I thought so - you're moving too quickly, Matoi. You're rushing your training. It takes time to properly learn a move. A week just isn't enough time to learn something as complicated and delicate as Blood Tempo. You need to slow down. I know you're motivated..." motivated was an understatement, "... but you need to practice the basics before diving headfirst into the deep end. Do you believe All Might became as strong as he is by stumbling upon a powerful Quirk?"

Ryuko failed to shrug her way out of Vlad King's grasp.

"You ain't making the point you're trying to make."

Which was both the right and wrong thing to say.

"Assuming you pass this exam, Matoi, don't expect summer training to be a walk in the park," there was no assumption involved. She had passed. And his feelings aside, she'd pushed herself beyond her limits," I might not train you, but someone will ensure you master the basics until your eyes bleed!"

When he finally let go, she pretended like she could have escaped whenever she wanted, "Whatever. Are you finished? I have - "

Her stomach suddenly turned upside-down.

Something bubbled her throat.

And with only the briefest of warnings, Ryuko keeled over and hurled a *rainbow* onto the ground.

"You have nobody to blame other than yourself, Matoi," while Kirishima turned around before getting a full view of her half-digested lunch, Vlad King scoffed. The blood hero reached down, carefully picking up his visor and brushing dirt off the orange lenses, "Instead of training your body until it was properly acclimated to the strain, you pushed yourself too hard and too fast. This is the consequence of skipping the basics."

Ryuko would have given him the finger, but the moment she thought it was over, another rainbow exploded from her mouth.

She hated him.

She really, truly hated him.

Interlude 11

She was Satsuki Kiryuin.

Sixteen years old.

Class representative of Shiketsu High School's class 2-A.

A nearly perfect grade point average since elementary school.

Dual championship titles in Kenjutsu and Kendo, having deposed every adversary in the young adult bracket two years running.

And her Quirk?

Her Quirk remained, as ever, the same.

Despite the overwhelming wealth at her mother's disposal, Ragyo Kiryuin's office was surprisingly spartan. Its appearance betrayed one with a finer taste rather than someone who bought artwork and miscellaneous items simply because they had money to spend. That was not to say her mother *didn't* spend frivolously. The sculptures near the door. The ancient books on the glass shelves to her right. The imported granite tiles. The chairs stitched with genuine leather from Italy. Her mother's taste was unique. It was in this setting she'd found herself summoned. A message at six oh one in the morning. A minute after she woke up. She'd quickly taken a shower, put on her pressed school uniform, informed the principal she would be leaving for the day and stepped into the company car waiting outside the academy's gates.

"Your grades have remained steady despite your extracurricular activities."

As one of Shiketsu's wealthiest benefactors, her mother sat on the school's board of trustees.

But the CEO of Revocs was generous, magnanimous and compassionate. Instead of using her position to her advantage, her mother refused to partake in anything involving Shiketsu's curriculum. That did not mean, however, if she wanted, Ragyo Kiryuin wasn't above obtaining her school records prior to their official release. For there existed a world of difference between the Ragyo Kiryuin who donated hundreds of millions of yen per year to various charities and educational funds and the dangerously cunning woman sitting behind her desk with a printed copy of her end of term grades in front of her.

A difference involving countless innocent lives, innumerable crimes and connections to every syndicate inside and outside the country.

"Despite my initial reservations, you're well on your way to graduating summa cum laude," they both knew what she meant. And if it weren't obvious, the mocking disdain radiating from her mother's matronly voice and the slight narrowing of maroon eyes provided an excellent rebuttal, "I suppose that's adequate."

Adequate.

For as long as she could remember, nothing she'd achieved with her own blood, sweat and tears had risen above the level of merely adequate.

The only praise she'd *ever* earned had been the day their personal doctor informed her mother she'd inherited the Kiryuin Quirk.

"I strive to do my best," Satsuki genuflected enough to demonstrate respect, but not enough to prostrate inferiority.

It was the nominal answer.

And one her mother accepted.

"That being said," the subtle tapping of a manicured fingernail drew her attention. She didn't doubt her mother had digital copies of her

end of term marks on her computer. Printing out copies was a waste of resources, yet gave physical emphasis. An appreciable amount of time passed in forced silence as Ragyo Kiryuin flicked through the papers, examining them with an amused smirk, "I didn't summon you to discuss your grades," a suit of purest white, its matching blazer and waistcoat doing little to hide a matronly physique envied by most women, made from the finest fabrics in the world, confessed everything as piercing maroon eyes shifted upwards, "I wish to know what you plan to do this summer."

A question.

Yet her mother already knew the answer.

"My plans haven't changed," which was why she spoke the truth, "I intend to continue my work-study at Yoroi Musha's agency," if she'd truly wanted, she could have interned under Endeavor. Or any of the top ten heroes, the exceptions being All Might and Mirko. Most professional heroes would betray their colleagues and allies to have Ragyo Kiryuin's daughter at their agency. Humanity was naturally greedy. Heroes were no different. There were exceptions, of course, but she'd yet to meet one, "I've already spoken with his sidekick. They've agreed to accept my application - "

"Without consulting me?"

Satsuki nearly bit her tongue.

"Forgive me," seeking to dissolve the situation, she apologized, "I didn't believe such matters were worthy of your time."

"Oh?"

But it appeared an apology simply wasn't sufficient. Lips on a flawless face twenty-five years younger than her genuine age quirked into a smirk, "You presumed I, your mother, didn't care about your well-being?"

She opened her mouth to answer yet quickly thought otherwise.

"Oh, *Satsuki*," the breathless enunciation trailed down her spine like cold fingers, "When are you going to grow out of this ridiculous childish phase?" it was a question normally asked by a parent concerned about their child's well-being. And perhaps something resembling concern clung to her mother's voice as a lamprey does to a shark or fish. But it was nothing more than a façade, "As your mother, I have nothing but your best interests in heart. Everything I do, I do for *you*, Satsuki. Or have you forgotten everything I've sacrificed?"

Her voice didn't waver, "I have not."

Cold maroon eyes expressed disappointment.

"But there comes a time when a mother *must* put her foot down," she took the insult in stride. It was the same argument they'd had every semester since she'd gotten into Shiketsu on academic recommendation, "I allowed you to attend Shiketsu because I believed you'd eventually outgrow your puerile fantasies. But I see that was a mistake," Ragyo's permanent smirk faltered, exposing the frustration bubbling underneath the surface, "Needless to say, my patience has reached its limit. I've indulged your little rebellion long enough. It's time you start thinking about your future."

Her future.

She knew exactly what that meant.

"You've spoken your mind on this subject several times," while her heart skipped a single beat, Satsuki kept her voice perfectly measured, not a syllable or word spoken with anything less than absolute conviction, "But rest assured, I've taken your opinion into consideration and no longer intend to pursue professional heroism," for the first time in what must have been weeks, a silver eyebrow quirked, the only sign her mother was genuinely listening, "Once I

graduate, I intend to pursue a double major in business management and finance at Tohoku University."

She waited.

An eternity passed as she waited for her mother's response.

"Hmm, very well, I suppose I can indulge your whims a little longer," aware of her daughter's subtle reactions, Ragyo stood up, lithe muscles betraying impossible strength effortlessly raising her six-and-a-half-foot frame, "Provided, of course, you inform this... Yoroï Musha..." her mother didn't forget the hero's name. Her mother didn't forget anything, "... that your hobby won't last much longer."

Satsuki closed her eyes, "I will inform him as soon as possible."

"Good."

And with that, the subject was finally dropped, "Is that everything, mother?"

"No."

Her eyes momentarily widened before resuming their former expression. Of course. She'd accepted her mother's invitation anticipating another confrontation concerning her future, but that did not mean she was surprised. Her mother didn't rise to the pinnacle of power through self-abasing carelessness. Every action Ragyo Kiryuin took had a purpose. Absolutely nothing was wasted. Even now, standing behind her desk, speaking with such mocking derision one might almost confuse it with amusement, there was not a single opening in Ragyo Kiryuin's mental or physical defenses. Ruthless. Cunning. Merciless. The public naively believed her mother's brilliant business acumen was the reason behind Revocs' meteoric ascent from a humble support gear company to the third most powerful conglomerate on the planet.

But that was only a fraction of the truth.

"As you're aware, I-Expo is right around the corner," forcefully drawn from her thoughts by a familiar *clack*, Satsuki indifferently observed her mother strut across the office. Icy blue eyes shifted as the older woman walked towards the windows, each step possessing boundless grace and decorum, "It's the opportunity to demonstrate our superiority over worthless fools. Our competitors spend countless billions developing cutting-edge technology, hoping to break our stranglehold on the international markets. Alas, every year, thanks to dearest Nui's undeniable genius and my leadership, they unfortunately fail."

Self-righteous mirth dripped from her mother's soul as pale skin and maroon eyes reflected ominously upon the tinted glass.

And in that pause, Satsuki took a chance.

"It's a shame the high-order tailor is far too modest to demonstrate her creations on the world stage," a backhanded insult disguised as a genuine compliment.

Multicolored light *radiated* from her mother.

A light so powerful it filled the office, leaving no room for shadows to gather.

Yet Satsuki, despite that undeniably malevolent pressure, didn't react.

She remained unyielding.

And after a moment, her mother's cruel eyes shifted back to the window, "Hmm, yes, the whims of an artiste are fickle," the length of time that followed such an otherwise innocuous admission could be measured in seconds, "Satsuki, what is the difference between Revocs and Detnerat?"

A trick question.

"Yotsubashi focuses on designing individualized gear and clothing for those unable to afford or purchase standardized equipment," after so many times, repeating the answer Ragyo Kiryuin wished to hear was as easy as breathing, "But what is standard? There is no standard but what we choose. Revocs caters to the masses. We treat the customers not as though they're different, simply that their Quirks require individualized attention and care," each word had been rehearsed and practiced countless times until Satsuki didn't need to so much as think, "That is why we stand above the inferior masses clad in our generosity like pigs in human clothing. It is why no matter how many pathetic dregs he recruits into his pathetic army of sheep, no matter how hard he attempts to flood the black market, Yotsubashi will never stand shoulder to shoulder with us."

Her eyebrows knitted.

She waited, passive and silent.

And eventually her mother turned aside, lips quirked into a ruthless and monstrously cold smile.

"You desire to stand atop my shoulders, do you? Well, if you wish to take my throne, you'll need to start showing yourself to our clients and competitors. Not as Junketsu or whatever childish name you've chosen, but as Satsuki Kiryuin," there was no mistaking the biting undertone, "I may not believe in nepotism, but that does not mean I won't at least hold open the door," a sensuous chuckle followed the backhanded insult, "Since you apparently have nothing better to do this summer, you will be accompanying me to I-Expo."

It was not a question or request.

It was a *demand* .

"As you wish," she kept herself from asking further unnecessary questions, for there was nothing she could say to change her mother's mind, "Am I allowed to bring a plus one?"

Ragyo tilted her head, shifting the beams of light filling her office.

"You'll be there as a representative of Revocs, not Shiketsu," heels clacked as she turned around, strutted back to her desk and sat down, lips quirked into a smile and thick eyebrows knitted in amusement, "I don't care who you bring with you, simply that they don't embarrass Revocs. Now, unless there's something *you* wish to discuss, I think we're finished..."

Her mother trailed off.

But the implications were obvious.

"No, there is nothing else."

When she turned around, Hououmaru was already waiting. Her mother's personal assistant said nothing as a dark-skinned hand latched onto the handle and effortlessly opened the thick mahogany doors, granting her passage to the empty corridor and the elevators beyond. Her heels *snap-clacked* on polished marble reflected her warped visage. Sconces flushed the hallway with warm orange light. The sound of her breathing was faint, almost undetectable as the elevators opened and the former heroes Ragyo Kiryuin hired as her bodyguards waited for her to step inside. Heroes who lacked the genuine qualities possessed in abundance by All Might. Greedy and avaricious fools who cared more about money than fulfilling their obligations.

The perfect examples of Chizome Akaguro's philosophy wearing her mother's uniforms.

But she said nothing.

She confessed *nothing* .

Yet as the elevator closed, the slightest hint of hatred *simmered* in her eyes.

Chapter 37

She wasn't exactly sure *how* Mina tricked her into going to Kiyashi Ward Shopping Mall, yet here she was, riding an escalator to the third floor with Tsu.

"I'm surprised you decided to come."

That was the understatement of the century. She had nothing against shopping. She just didn't see the point in making a day out of it, "Eh, needed a few things," the mall was packed with stores catering to every type of Quirk imaginable, plus the usual stores, cafes and old-fashioned arcades, "What about you?" stepping off the escalator, Ryuko rubbed her fingers against the back of her neck. With spring semester finished and summer training not starting for another three weeks, she'd exchanged her school uniform for blue jeans and a black shirt with the Kanji for 'blood' graffitied across the front in bright orange and yellow, "You still looking for those night-vision scuba goggles?"

"Yeah, but they're still a little out of my price range," a white shirt hanging over forest green shorts and sandals contrasted Tsuyu with her friend, "I was actually thinking of checking out Aquatic Sunset. Bug spray would be nice. And since we're probably not going to be training in our costumes, maybe I should look for some new clothes," wide eyes blinked, "You have any recommendations?"

"Recommendations?"

Ryuko crossed her eyes, "Never gone camping, but there's probably gonna be thorns and poison ivy."

"Good point," stopping in front of Aquatic Sunset, Tsuyu croaked, "See you later, Ryu."

"Text me when you're done and we'll catch some lunch," despite the general sense of frustration she'd felt since randomly checking her email early in the morning, Ryuko pretended nothing was wrong, "My treat."

Coming to the mall had been a complete waste of time.

She already had most of the stuff Aizawa recommended for the training camp.

But spending a week in the wilderness at the mercy of heroes determined to squeeze every last drop of potential out of her blood wasn't the reason she felt miserable.

It was I-Expo.

She'd never cared about the world-famous exposition. Oh sure, she'd catch a few highlights of whatever Revocs or the other companies unveiled. Maybe watch a video demonstrating some cutting-edge support tech. But beyond that, it had been her dad's thing. The infamous Professor Isshin Matoi. Every year, down to the exact minute, he took the same flight to I-Island, checked out for an entire week and appeared on the news shaking hands with some of the greatest scientists and heroes from across the world. Including All Might. And now that was gone, some asshole genius decided to memorialize her dad's lifetime of achievements on the first night of the exposition with her as the guest of honor.

It pissed her the hell off.

And if that wasn't bad enough, according to that same email, the exhibitionist pervert was giving her dad's eulogy.

"Ugh, screw it," shaking her head, Ryuko refused to fall into that pit of emotional annoyance, "No point thinking about it," if she had no choice but to go, she might as well go. It didn't mean she had to like it. All she had to do was sit for the opening ceremonies, pretend to

care about random strangers talking about her dad like they actually knew him and leave on the first available flight back to the country.

At some point she'd walked into a bookstore.

Why, she didn't know.

"Hi, how can I assist you today?"

The girl behind the register at Phantom Books greeted her with an overly wide smile. Forced cheerfulness. And a pair of horns sticking around the company-mandated blue hat. Ryuko didn't give her anything more than an offhanded acknowledgement. The bookstore was quaint. She could count the number of people on one hand with fingers left over. And smelled of scented candles, freshly printed paper and black ink, "Just looking around."

"Okay, but don't be afraid to ask if you need help."

She filed that away and promptly forgot about it.

Fiction. Non-fiction. Children. Comics. Education.

Phantom Books had everything.

She wandered the aisles with no clear destination or goal, pausing every so often to look at a particularly interesting book.

"Hey, you're from UA, aren't you?"

With the benefit of hindsight, experience and half a brain, she should have realized something was seriously off. But at the time, having dealt with four or five idiots cheering Midoriya and Todoroki as soon as they walked into the mall, she hadn't cared. A random stranger asking if she went to UA didn't set off any alarms in her head. And there wasn't the unsettling vibe whenever Couturier opened her mouth. There was *something* weird. A smell. An odor hovering on the tip of her tongue she couldn't immediately identify. But instead of

thinking too hard about it, Ryuko refused to acknowledge their existence, hoping they'd eventually get the message and leave.

But whoever was standing behind her couldn't take the hint.

"Oh my gosh, I can't believe it's you!" now they were giggling, which made it *really* hard to read an already boring book on the first heroes, "I mean, I saw you earlier, but there were sooooo many people! Anyway, it's really great to meet you, Ryuko! I'm your biggest fan!"

Ryuko's eyes froze halfway down a page.

She'd long since learned how to feign interest. It was her standard reaction whenever Mina or Toru worked themselves into a frenzy about the latest fashion trends. The less attention you gave Mina, the more determined she grew in figuring out why you weren't listening. But pretend you care about some stupid hero popularity contest or whether a green skirt is cuter than a purple skirt and things quickly went back to normal. The same lesson applied to situations where random strangers - or more likely, stalkers - hunted you down. She just needed to pretend to care, maybe give them an autograph, act like it wasn't the creepiest thing imaginable and they'd eventually leave.

And that smell...

"Really?"

Her first impression of the stalker was relief. They weren't Couturier, although there were enough similarities that if the blonde bitch hadn't confessed to killing her dad, she might've weighed her options. And the second was vague unease. The same feeling as walking down a dark hallway. She didn't recognize the uniform, but the girl must've come straight from school. A beige cardigan only confused her more. And that was simply what she wore. Her actual appearance wasn't quite weird, but felt incomplete. Dirty ash-blonde hair styled into disheveled buns with equal-length bangs framing a face stretched so

far into a smile she could see pairs of fangs. Yellow cat-like eyes shimmering with excitement. And a blush deep enough that she almost flinched.

It was creepy as hell.

"Uh... didn't think I had fans," the familiar smell intensified when the girl leaned forward.

"Are you kidding?" hands clenched in front of her face, the teenager bounced, "The moment I saw you on tv, I knew we were destined to be friends!"

The color drained from Ryuko's face.

Either she was dealing with another Mako or this stalker had more than a few screws loose, "What?"

"The UA sports festival!" the older girl wiggled again, her knees rubbing together and a blush clashing against pale skin, "I really didn't care, but when I saw the highlights of your fight against the weird ghost guy, I couldn't look away! It was amazing! You were covered in so much blood! Like, a heck of a lot of blood!" now the teenager she knew must have an entire toolbox of loose screws was pumping her arms up and down, "Your Quirk was just amazing and awesome! Can I see it? Please!?"

The number of questions asked in the same breath certainly rivaled Mako on her worst days.

But this stranger wasn't Mako.

And she wasn't born yesterday.

Because she *finally* recognized the smell clinging to the creepy stalker. It was something she'd known her entire life. From the moment she fell off her tricycle, skinning her elbow and activating her Quirk, she knew *blood*. The faint rusty smell. The way it turns

rancid as it dries. The odor dripped from the psycho's hands. It stained beige sleeves. It splattered across a smile. And no amount of scented shampoo, cheap perfume and deodorant could cover that up.

"Nope, ain't gonna happen."

Shutting the dull biography shut with a little more emphasis than necessary, Ryuko pretended to yawn while counting the number of people in the bookstore. Other than the teenager at the front counter, there was a couple in their mid-twenties, a kid reading a comic book two aisles over, an old man choosing between two self-help books and a middle-aged mom talking to someone on her phone, "Sorry you came all this way for nothing," ninety-nine percent certain she was dealing with a serial killer, or an insane villain, or both, she arrogantly walked towards the back of the store, taking whatever might happen as far away from the other customers as possible, "But I ain't the sort of person to take requests from *villains* ."

A serrated hunting knife stained with long-dried blood slid out of the psycho's cardigan.

Long-practiced fingers gripped the wooden handle marred by a jagged crack as excitement devolved into abhorrent fascination. Manic admiration burned in yellow eyes. Dress shoes slipped against green carpeting. The middle-aged woman screamed. The couple at the front of the store grabbed their son and ran outside. The old man moved faster than someone his age should. And with a deranged expression bordering upon fetishistic, the unmasked serial killer eagerly launched herself at Ryuko, who avoided her surprise assault without so much as a paper cut.

"Boy, you're fast."

The psycho sighed at her relatively clean knife, "Like, unfair fast. I was really trying to stab you, but you just moved too fast for me," she twisted the tip of the blade against her pinky finger, pressing hard enough to indent the skin but not draw blood as cat-like eyes bobbed

alongside her head, "Think you could slow down? You know, just a little. I want our special moment to be fun!"

Ryuko opened and closed her fingers, knuckles cracking one after another, "How about you drop that knife so I can smash my fist into your face?"

"Hmm, tempting," swaying ever-so-slightly on her heels, the ashen blonde villain stopped playing with the hunting knife, "But I'd rather cut *you* wide open, Ryuko!"

The crazed teenager wasn't fast, but she was goddamn insane. If the smell of old *blood* clinging to the freak wasn't proof enough something was off, the ear-to-ear grin exposing pairs of fangs and the lustful blush tinting her cheeks crimson destroyed any remaining doubt. She kept moving backwards, avoiding the frighteningly accurate hunting knife doing its best to draw blood. Her shoulder. Her stomach. Her neck. Hell, even her arms. The psychopath wasn't swinging wildly and hoping she'd hit something important. She was aiming specifically towards her veins. She seemingly moved randomly while striking quickly enough to prevent so much as a moment's rest.

It was freaking annoying.

When her ass slammed into a table displaying the sixth installment in some stupid series about magical heroes fighting robotic dinosaurs or something ridiculous, Ryuko waited until the knife descended before dodging left. The table trembled, several books scattering as the knife stabbed through hundreds of pages filled with redundant characters and repetitive dialogue. On her back foot, skidding away from the serial killer student - or a villain wearing the clothes of the student she'd murdered on the way over, which was far more disturbing than she realized - Ryuko slid around the forward jab intending to stab directly into her jugular. The blade passed inches from her throat, brushing against her skin like a steel wind.

"Piss off!"

A pained gasp accompanied her knuckles embedded themselves into the psycho's stomach, knocking the wind out of the freak's lungs and sending her crashing into a bookshelf.

"Tch," shaking her wrist as the villain stumbled out of the pile of self-help books and biographies, swaying back and forth with crimson trickling down her forehead, Ryuko clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, "Who sent you? Was it those League of Villains assholes?"

"Nope!"

The psychopathic teenager flicked her thumb across some of the blood coating her face and *licked* it, "I heard about them when Mr. Stainy was arrested. Seeing him covered with his own blood, beaten and stabbed, barely about to walk without falling over, was really tempting! I wanted to cut him real bad! Like, super bad! I wanted to *be* Mr. Stainy!" as the freak ranted, her expression turned increasingly immodest, "But compared to you, Mr. Stainy's nothing! I could stab him all day until he was bathed in blood and it wouldn't get me nearly this worked up," voice trembling and knees visibly quivering, the psycho picked up her knife, "That's why I want to become you more than anything in the world!"

As the blood-drunk sociopath resumed her assault, Ryuko grimaced.

That settled it.

This girl was fucking nuts.

Chapter 38

"I have a question too!"

A villain who could decay anything he touched was dangerous, which begged several questions. What were his limits? Was it only his right hand? Or did his Quirk extend to his left as well? Did Shigaraki actually require all five of his fingers touching whatever he wanted to decay or was that nothing more than a bluff? And since fingers weren't significantly different from toes, did the villain's Quirk work through his feet? No, if that were the case, Shigaraki wouldn't be able to wear sneakers. Not to mention he'd decay the ground everywhere he walked. So, unless Shigaraki's control was perfect, decay was limited to what his fingers touched. In the few seconds between Uraraka arriving and Shigaraki let go, Izuku choked back a cough and refused to think about how close he'd come to death.

"Couturier," on the verge of tears, impotent frustration caused Izuku's voice to crack, "What's her objective? What does she want with Ryuko?"

Not ten feet away, Shigaraki stopped walking.

"Who knows, your guess is as good as mine," surrounded by hundreds of ignorant minds unable to fathom anything outside their minuscule windows, dependent upon heroes saving the day, the villain sounded less than enthused when he turned just enough to look Midoriya in the eye, "She's annoying. Everything she does pisses me off," cracked lips twisted into a scowl, "I'd kill her myself, but she's stronger than she looks."

"You hate her that much?"

Izuku couldn't comprehend that answer, "Your own comrade?"

"Comrade?" the question dripped from Shigaraki's mouth like acrid poison, "Don't make me laugh. She's nothing more than a glorified bodyguard," craggy skin tightened at the thought of himself and Couturier being friends. Or worse, allies, "I couldn't care less if one of you heroes manages to kill her. It'd be a weight off my shoulders."

"And All For One?"

It was risky.

And dangerous.

But even if it was worse than jumping into shark-infested waters, it was a still question Izuku needed to ask, "What's he planning?"

"Why do ~you~ need to know?"

She was there.

In plain sight.

Behind them.

Couturier .

"Gotta say, that's an awfully personal question," the blonde villain had appeared out of nowhere, sitting between Midoriya and Uraraka without so much as a sound. Bright sapphire eyes devoid of warmth stared not at the two students, but Shigaraki, as manicured fingernails polished pink ever-so-gently hugged trembling shoulders forced into paralysis through sheer terror, "You have something you want to share with the rest of the class?"

Izuku couldn't talk.

He couldn't even move.

Couturier's fingers were as cold as ice.

"I thought I told you to leave me alone," unaware of Couturier paralyzing Midoriya and Uraraka into near lethargy, Shigaraki grumbled.

"Gosh, it almost sounds like you don't want me around," now sitting between the two UA students, Couturier swung her feet, pink and white sneakers moving back and forth as she pursed her cheeks, "Hmm, it's like you said. I can go wherever I want, whenever I want and see ~whoever~ I want. And nobody can stop me. Not even you," she strummed her dainty fingers one after another, simultaneously alternating between relaxing and squeezing, before snapping her eyes towards Izuku, "So, what do you want to me to with - "

"Shut up."

Shigaraki wanted to wring Couturier or Nui or whatever the annoyance was calling herself these days until she was nothing more than a pile of dust on the floor. Unfortunately, that was far easier said than done, "Your voice is irritating."

"That's mean," something almost like feigned sadness dripped from Couturier when Shigaraki snapped under his breath, "I'm your bodyguard, remember?" throwing the man child's words back in his face, she leaned forward. And for the first time, Izuku saw what she was wearing. She'd forgone her elegant costume for something less conspicuous - a white shirt with blue jeans. Her hair was still styled in massive pigtails, yet nobody seemed to notice, "What if something awful happened to you? I'd never forgive myself if even a single unkempt hair on your head was touched."

If her assurance meant anything, Shigaraki either didn't know or chose to ignore it.

"Shouldn't you be doing something useful," it was a question yet phrased as a backhanded insult, "Why don't you go play with Ryuko Matoi? She should be around here somewhere."

"And why would I do that?"

Couturier smiled, "My life ~doesn't~ revolve around her, you know!" while she dismantled everything Shigaraki threw at her, Izuku wondered why nobody was helping. They couldn't be the only ones experiencing this terror. But nobody seemed to notice anything. The entire mall was going about their lives ignorant of the S-Rank villain capable of killing hundreds of people before heroes or police could arrive. He swallowed the lump in his throat. And as if that was some signal, he felt Couturier squeeze his shoulder just a little harder. She was making a point. If she wanted, she could easily kill them.

"Hey, you look familiar," a bead of sweat trickled down Izuku's cheek. She sounded cheerful, but there was nothing happy in her voice. It was devoid of something, "Are you the one who tried punching Shiggy's cute pet?" that she talked about the Nomu like it was a cat or a dog only proved there was something wrong with her, "From what Shiggy said, you have one heck of a punch. I wonder what sort of Quirk you have... Izuku Midoriya."

Izuku gulped.

She knew his name.

His full name.

Uraraka was terrified.

She couldn't move.

She couldn't *think* .

"Oh? What's wrong? You look pale," Couturier smiled at Uraraka, whose trembling eyes stared blindly forward, "You don't look too good," she sounded upset, but her charming smile never faltered, "Don't tell me you ~honestly~ think I'd kill either of you just because I can? Gosh, give me some credit! I have some standards! Sure, it would be easy, but so is stabbing someone's dear old dad. All it would take is a little *squeeze* ."

A breathless moan passed through Uraraka's mouth.

"Let them go," Shigaraki scratched his neck, "Our little friend has given me something to think about it."

"Oh? That's a surprise."

Izuku felt something change about Couturier. He didn't know what it was. And he was too terrified to do anything more than stare at the floor, heart pounding inside his chest, when her fingers squeezed just a little tighter, "I certainly didn't expect that," her voice was like shattered glass, "That must've been some conversation," her breath lightly brushed against his cheek. A mixture of cherries and strawberries and something he swore resembled coffee, "But I'm curious," he didn't know why that piece of information stuck out, but he didn't have time to think about it, "What sort of hero helps someone trying to kill them?"

He couldn't fathom an answer to such a bizarre question.

"Were you listening? I said forget about those brats."

"Sorry about that," she teleported in the blink of an eye. As soon as Shigaraki interrupted her question, Couturier was next to him, hands folded against the small of her back, "I must still be a little shocked you're acting so mature. I guess even someone like you has to grow up eventually."

Izuku could only watch Shigaraki and Couturier vanish into the unsuspecting crowd.

He didn't know how much time passed after that point.

A couple of minutes, at the very least.

His heart was pounding. He felt like throwing up. And his skin was clammy. They'd come to within an inch of death. It was a fact he couldn't deny. Despite possessing One For All and learning how to

utilize a fraction of All Might's incredible strength, he was aware of one thing - if it weren't for Shigaraki, Couturier would have killed him. He knew that. There wasn't a single doubt in his mind the monstrous villain wanted to do something horrifying and beyond the pale. She was a monster. The same villain wanted by nearly every hero organization in the world. He couldn't believe someone so evil existed. Was this what Ryuko and Kacchan fought at the USJ? Was she who Ryuko struggled against in Corusco? Izuku gulped, bitter bile forcing its way up his throat.

"Midoriya!"

"Midoriya!"

"MIDORIYA!"

He didn't notice someone yelling until Ida grabbed his shoulders, "... Ida?"

"Are you alright?" the normally unflappable class representative was worried. And for good reason He recognized the terror in Uraraka's eyes. It was a terror he'd experienced himself in Hosu when Stain unleashed such overwhelming and monstrous bloodlust he'd been unable to do anything but fall to his knees, "What happened?"

Izuku remembered everything.

Shigaraki.

Couturier.

Everything.

"Shigaraki," even though the villains were gone, Uraraka had barely started calming down, "He was here. And so was Couturier."

It was like a knife stabbed Ida, "... what?" his eyes widened. Something caught in the back of his throat and for a brief yet horrifying moment, the class representative felt a cold shiver race

down his spine. And without prompting, aware of the mall's ongoing evacuation, he grabbed Midoriya's shoulders, tightened his grip and *shook* . It wasn't pleasant. It was a little degrading. But he didn't care. While Midoriya's head violently snapped back and forth like a doll, the muscles and bones in his neck temporarily vanishing, Ida was far more concerned about their safety and well-being, "Did she hurt you in any way?"

"NOT. THAT. I. CAN. REMEMBER. NOW. CAN. YOU. STOP. SHAKING. ME."

Ida stopped.

Barely.

And sighed, "You obviously have a lot to say," most of the mall's patrons had evacuated through the eastern and southern entrances, "But it'll have to wait. A villain attacked someone on the third floor. I've spoken to a couple of witnesses. They claim a blonde teenager wearing a school uniform attacked another girl with a knife. I've been able to contact everyone in our group except for Matoi, which leads me to believe *she's* fighting this villain."

That snapped Izuku back to reality, "We have to help her!"

"Help me with what?"

Her voice took them off-guard.

"Matoi!"

As surprised as anyone when Ryuko descended the escalator carrying a clearly unconscious individual upon her shoulder, Ida punctuated his declarative question with several chops of his arm, "We were worried sick about you! Why didn't you answer your phone? And who is that clearly injured person you're carrying!?"

"Thanks for the pep talk."

Ryuko rolled her eyes, "I'm fine, by the way, thanks for asking. Just got ambushed by some crazy-ass stalker," in response to her genuine annoyance, Ida opened his mouth. And then closed it when she quirked an eyebrow and *dared* him to say anything. All without saying anything. Which was fine. Because her day had gone to shit as soon as Himiko Toga - whose name she knew because the psycho introduced herself - walked into the bookstore, "Hey - I miss something?"

She'd noticed it, but ignored it until it was staring her in the face.

And the answer *wasn't* what she wanted to hear.

Least of all from Ida.

"You're fucking with me."

Chapter 39

Boredom always made everything worse.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

Her finger tapped against the metal table, its incessant and understandably frustrated rhythm struggling for dominance against the monotonous scratching. Grooved pupils silhouetted against sapphire searched for anything to distract themselves from the boredom slowly yet steadily tearing apart her sanity. Cheek propped on her knuckles, face smushed sideways and noises impossible for most people to hear passing between her teeth, Ryuko's eyebrow twitched. And her dark, navy-blue hair stood at various odds and ends, appearing slightly disheveled despite her constant care. She sighed again. Her luck freaking sucked. The ten-by-ten room didn't have the dingy smell. And she didn't feel like the world was attempting to crush her soul. And it was a lot brighter. But that didn't change the fact it was still the same goddamn room.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

Something in the depths of her soul flinched at the irritating noise.

On the other side of the table, slightly bald and glasses falling down his nose, the detective assigned to interview her about Himiko Toga was writing something. And he'd been writing something for the last ten minutes - make that twelve - because she'd checked her phone. Not once. Not twice. But six times. It's how she knew Tsu, Ida and half of her class texted her twenty times, plus two voice mails and thirty pictures of Mako attempting to devour some sort of ice cream sculpture.

Her stomach growled.

It was ten past eight.

A little over five hours since kicking Himiko Toga's stalker ass.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

And she was *still* answering questions. It wasn't like she didn't understand why the police wanted to know everything about the blood-crazed psychopath who'd probably killed quite a few people. It was their job. And she was more than willing to help. But the type of questions... and asking the *same* questions five times... was beginning to piss her off. How did she recognize Himiko Toga? If she were able to smell blood on Toga, why didn't she leave the bookstore and all the police? Tch, as if a psychopath who got off about memories wouldn't try something in a crowded mall. And no, no matter how many times they asked, she hadn't used her Quirk. It had never even crossed her mind. The blood wasn't hers. The damage wasn't from her Quirk. And if he asked about it again, she was going to punch him.

Consequences be damned.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

"Well, I believe that's everything."

The magical words were as wonderful as she expected them to be, "We appreciate your cooperation, Miss Matoi. I know it's been difficult," the detective cleaned his glasses, ignorant of how right and wrong he was. Wrong because Toga hadn't been the worst freak she'd fought. Not by a long shot. And right because answering the same questions five times wasn't fun. It was the exact opposite of fun, "A villain attack in broad daytime. I hate to think might have happened if you hadn't captured Himiko Toga," but despite having every reason to say something, Ryuko kept her mouth firmly shut. She had no right to complain. Not about this. Not about anything.

Not after Couturier 'introduced herself' to Izuku and Ochako.

"Someone that dangerous," and yet the otherwise ordinary detective was still talking, "You could've been hurt."

"Yeah, well, I wasn't," a bit of snark coated her tongue, "So, what's going to happen to her?"

"Usually we wouldn't discuss open cases," the manilla folder opened and several pages shifted on the table in front of the detective, "But -"

"I'll take it from here, Ejiri."

The detective was as surprised as Ryuko when a stern woman best resembling a bipedal dinosaur in a business uniform, flanked on either side by two officers *shorter* than her, walked through the door, "Good evening, Miss Mato, I am Chief Mizuchi," and sounded like she'd breath fire if someone glanced at her funny, "I've heard quite a bit about you."

That didn't mean Ryuko was intimidated, "That right?"

Something close enough to a chuckle to be mistaken otherwise hissed through double-hinged jaws full of sharp teeth, "I'll be blunt - thirty minutes ago, Himiko Toga's apprehension reached the evening news. Reporters are already clamoring for information on the hero who captured the infamous prefecture vampire," Ryuko had to crane her head upwards just to meet Nara Mizuchi's piercing blue reptilian eyes. The woman was *tall* . Really tall, "We've kept them at bay for the moment, but it's only a matter of time until someone talks."

"Great," it was almost impossible to quantify how much that news sucked, "As if today wasn't bad enough."

"Which brings us to why I'm here," the draconic chief of police raised a set of clawed fingers, grabbing a thin folder from one of her employees, "As you know, uncertified individuals cannot use their Quirks in public without consent from their guardians *or* their lives are in immediate danger. You were attacked by a villain. You could

have used your Quirk. Yet you did not. Against an unstable and dangerous threat more than willing to injure civilians, you displayed remarkable restraint. I don't know whether to be grateful or disappointed."

Ryuko's nose itched.

"... and?" one of the cops guarding the dragon woman took umbrage at her disrespect, which she ignored by acting even less respectful, "You came here to lecture me?"

"No."

The direct bluntness actually took her off-guard, "I did not," Chief Mizuchi snorted, which sounded like a monstrous snarl, "I came here to offer you a choice. If you wish, we can keep your involvement secret," the folder was tossed onto the table, spilling information on a costumed hero Ryuko remembered posing for pictures with several children at the entrance to the mall, "An off-duty hero recognized Himiko Toga when she entered Kiyashi Ward Shopping Mall. He followed her at a safe distance and apprehended the villain when she walked into Phantom Books."

There was a lengthy pause.

A moment where the chief of police and Ryuko exchanged looks.

"Of course, this all depends on you, Miss Matoi," reptilian features relaxed, "And what you want," something overcame the chief of police, "You didn't violate any regulations. You're well deserving of commendation. But if you don't want the spotlight, we're willing to keep your involvement confidential. Your friends will know the truth. But the public won't."

"A choice, huh?"

Ryuko let the question roll on her tongue.

It wasn't a choice, no matter how much the dragon woman about to rein fire upon the earth thought otherwise. She'd never wanted the spotlight. The rest of her class could bask in people recognizing them off the street or pointing out how much ass they'd kicked at the sports festival. But she hated that. She hated reporters getting up in her face with ridiculous and personal questions. And she loathed being given credit for something she didn't deserve. Restraint? That couldn't be further from the truth. The reason was far more selfish. She hadn't used her Quirk because Toga was obsessed with blood. The psycho had *shuddered* while blabbing about stabbing the hero killer until everything was painted red. The stalker's knees had trembled while talking about *her* Quirk.

UA had to have a therapist on staff, right?

Because she needed professional help.

Her nose itched.

And this time, she scratched it, "Where do I sign?"

"It's already finished," the chief of police wasn't surprised by her acquiescence, "You're free to leave, Miss Matoi. If we have any further questions, we'll contact UA."

If that wasn't permission to leave, Ryuko didn't know what was.

The sooner she left, the better.

But something stopped her.

"Hey," a thought she couldn't and wouldn't ignore, "Izuku and Ochako. How are they holding up?"

"They're fine. A little shaken, but otherwise unharmed," Chief Mizuchi glanced over her shoulder, meeting Ryuko's eye.

Ryuko looked away.

"... good..."

Her heart beat a little slower.

"... that's good to know..."

And she left the room.

The evening was colder than she expected. A crisp, almost cold breeze brushed against her face. The sweat from sitting in that small room for hours, repeating every little detail about Himiko Toga, evaporated, leaving her cheeks tingling. The sun was still setting, covering Kiyashi Police Station in a warm orange light. Standing outside the station, hands jabbed deep in her pockets, Ryuko tilted her head backwards and counted the stars twinkling in the skies. Something had changed. Something about *her* had changed. A couple of weeks ago, even hearing about Couturier would've sent her over the edge. But she wasn't frustrated. Well, she *was* frustrated. But it was a different kind of frustration. She felt detached, which didn't make sense no matter how many times she repeated the question.

It wasn't like she just up and stopped caring about avenging her dad.

She *needed* to take down Couturier.

But she wasn't stupid.

That's why, no matter how much she pretended otherwise, she was relieved she hadn't known Couturier was at the mall.

Because if she had, people would have gotten hurt.

Innocent people.

Couturier would have hurt them.

"Huuuuuuuhh..."

Ryuko ran a hand through her disheveled hair, wondering when she'd changed. Three months since running into Mako at the UA entrance exam. Six months since Rumi wrestled her to the ground at Seiai Academy. Fighting her dad's killer not once, but twice. Making friends. All because All Might felt it was a good idea to blackmail her. It felt like a dream. A waking nightmare. And next week, she was taking a five o'clock flight to I-Island halfway across the Pacific. It was surreal. No matter how she thought about everything, she couldn't believe this was her life. A lot of things had gone wrong. But that didn't mean nothing went right.

"Ryu!"

They were waiting outside the police station - Tsu, Yaoyorozu, Kaminari, Kirishima and Ida.

She cracked a smile.

Couturier might've gotten away, but everyone was safe.

And for now, that was good enough.

Interlude 12

"Kurogiri informed me you've held up your end of the bargain."

"Yes. Dearest Nui watched, but did not help, your protégé and his menagerie of recruits liberate Himiko Toga from the police. I must say, attacking while she was being transported to Erebus was a nice touch. Perhaps he's not as useless as I thought."

"Is that distrust I sense?"

"You cannot fault me for not believing your apprentice matured after a single conversation. Assuming Nui was telling the truth, his plan was short-sighted. If anything went wrong, he would've been arrested. Still, he shows promise. Which is better than my wildest expectations."

"Tomura might have taken that first step towards the future, but his path ahead is fraught with danger. The world isn't as kind as you or I. It won't hold his hand when he fails or help him onto his feet when he stumbles. If he desires to become something capable of standing against the symbol of peace, he'll need to do so on his own. He might not believe it, but we both know I won't always be there for him."

"And you think he'll be ready? Hmph, your faith in that boy is insufferable."

"Can I count on you to stand by Tomura if that day comes to pass?"

"If he earns my respect."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then I'll refuse your last request and forcibly take over your organization. Kyudai and Gigantomachia might not take kindly to my style of management, but they won't have a choice."

"I have faith Tomura will meet your lofty expectations. He's already proven himself capable of learning from his mistakes. And liberating Himiko Toga demonstrates a capacity to learn and adapt. But if something were to go wrong and Tomura falters too quickly, I'm certain Kyudai - and by extension, Gigantomachia - will listen to you."

"I'll hold you to that. Ah, but that reminds me. Speaking of plans, Hououmaru brought something interesting to my attention earlier this morning. You had a rather strange visitor. An arrogant individual foolish enough to think attacking I-Island during the exposition won't end in disaster. When were you intending to inform me of this unusual arrangement?"

"In due time."

"Oh? Is that right?"

"I'm curious how you learned about that. Hououmaru's Quirk, I take it?"

"At my request, of course. It's not that I don't trust the man who gave up everything for the sake of your ambitions. Kyudai's more than proven his loyalty several times over. But when Hououmaru oversaw the transfer of state-of-the-art equipment to Jaku Hospital at his request, she connected his shadow to her Quirk. It had been nothing more than a whim. I certainly hadn't expected to learn about your latest hobby. Or that it involves being taken hostage."

"Do you believe I would not have told you?"

*"No, but I believe you wouldn't have told me *everything* unless I broached the subject. Which appears to be the case. I will, of course, order Hououmaru to disconnect her Quirk from his shadow. Heaven knows the man cherishes his privacy. "*

"How much do you know?"

"Everything."

"Then do I need to explain anything?"

"Si tu le dis... when will this... Wolfram, was it?... make his move?"

"The night before the exposition opens to the public."

"So, during Isshin's ridiculous eulogy."

"You sound displeased."

"What gave it away? Pedantic speeches about Isshin's accomplishments will be torture enough without some arrogant, two-bit pathetic nobody waltzing into the room and demanding I do what he wants lest I find myself with a bullet through the brain. Oh, why am I even surprised? This isn't the first time you've pulled a stunt like this. That incident in Beijing might've been distasteful, but it was masterfully executed. Am I to presume this event will be equally explosive?"

"Of course."

"La vie est drole. Very well. I'll play along. But do try to silence Wolfram at a safe distance. My dresses are far more expensive than anything you're wearing."

Chapter 40

"... flight 5A, service from Haneda Airport, now arriving. I repeat, flight 5A, service from Haneda Airport, now arriving."

"All passengers must have their passports and paperwork ready for customs. Once again, all passengers..."

"Please remember that unauthorized Quirk usage is discouraged inside the terminal."

"Still. At. Stupid. Airport."

Ryuko didn't know how long she'd been standing in the immigration line. Five minutes. Ten. Hell, it could've been an hour. Time didn't work in the airport. And her sense of everything was screwed from the flight. Six hours in the air, four time zones and a twenty-minute delay because one of the pilots got stuck in traffic. Her day had sucked from start to finish. And now here she was, half of her hair matted, backpack slung over her shoulders, half a strawberry muffin clenched between her teeth, texting Tsu underneath air conditioning blasting at full goddamn power.

The line moved several feet before her phone buzzed.

"Are you sure you won't stick around, ribbit?"

She stared at the animated frog emoji.

A week ago, she'd have texted 'yes.'

But now?

Maybe she was just being selfish. If Aizawa wasn't doing whatever he did when he wasn't sleeping in that stupid blanket, he'd probably tell her to grow up. Or get over herself. Things designed to piss her off. It wasn't like she hated I-Island. At literally any other time, she

would've treated this as a well-deserved vacation. She'd visit the aquarium. Lounge at one of the beaches. But being forced to sit still for ninety-minutes and pretend to give a shit about strangers talking about her dad sapped the excitement. And the worst part? The ceremony was going to be on every major network. And that meant every camera was going to be looking at *her* all night. And reporters. Snooping, eavesdropping and parasitic bastards always looking for a story.

Like that blue-skinned bitch who *knew* there was something scandalous about her dad.

If Mako and Tsu hadn't been standing next to her, she'd have kicked that bitch's ass until it turned *bluer*.

But she could handle that.

She could *deal* with one stupid night.

What she couldn't deal with was Yaoyorozu inviting everyone to I-Expo. Ashido, Hagakure, Jiro, Uraraka and Tsu. They were all coming. And they were all coming on a chartered flight tomorrow. And they were staying at the same hotel. It threw her plans straight into the trash. Leaving first thing in the morning? That was never going to happen. Mina was probably still pissed about the tickets. What started as a game of rocks, papers, scissors to determine who got the two tickets to the expo's preview devolved into feats of speed and strength Yaoyorozu single-handedly decided that she, as a neutral bystander, had to officiate.

"No fair! Ryuko can't be referee!"

"That's right! She'll just pick Tsu! Bakugo should be referee!"

"Boycott! Boycott! Boycott!"

Mina and Toru complained from the moment Yaoyorozu dragged her into their shenanigans, throwing accusations of cheating and

blackmail and favoritism.

Which was why she made damn sure neither of them received a ticket.

"Still. Thinking. About. It," only one person stood between herself and the front of the line while she finally answered Tsu's text, hit send and tucked her phone back into her pocket.

"Good afternoon and welcome to I-Island."

Her first impression was how the hell anyone could be so cheerful at five in the afternoon, "I hope your flight was comfortable," the immigration agent spoke nearly flawless Japanese with a strange accent she couldn't quite place, "Please step onto the designated area and we can begin the final immigration inspection."

Ryuko followed the woman's hand towards the four-by-four-foot square to her right, shrugged and stepped onto the platform.

BEEP!

And immediately something went wrong.

The woman's smile faded when something flashed on her computer, "Miss, are you carrying anything particularly heavy?"

"... uh, no?"

Taken aback by the question, Ryuko mentally checked everything in her backpack. Two changes of clothes, a bikini she'd packed only because Mako and Mina wouldn't stop annoying her until she did, a dress for tomorrow night's stupid ceremony, a few odds and ends and, oh, the Seki Tekko. Nothing heavy. Nothing heavy *enough* to confuse a state-of-the-art and expensive security scanner. Of course, her answer didn't help. It wasn't what the agent wanted to hear because, of course, it couldn't be I-Island's fault. No, it had to be *her* fault. She rubbed her neck. She scratched her cheek. And

she watched the agent fiddle with whatever software barely kept everything functioning as close to normal as possible.

"Oh, my apologies."

At least twenty people collectively sighed when the woman finished doing whatever she was doing, "I must have forgotten to recalibrate the system. If you don't mind stepping back onto the platform..."

BEEP!

Ryuko sighed, "Don't tell me it's busted."

"No, it's just... please wait," an older man, mid-fifties with horns jutting between his ashen blonde hair, and with a face stern enough to shatter granite, appeared out of nowhere.

"Hmm?"

That was his entire response to whatever error message confused the woman.

"Uh... is something wrong?" Ryuko chanced a question, half-convinced she'd inadvertently did something illegal or broke I-Island's security.

Probably both.

"We're extremely sorry about the trouble," the man's Japanese was godawful and broken, which probably explained why the woman took over, "Do you mind stepping over to line three?" forcing another smile, her original customs agent pointed towards an equally long and exhausted line of people, "This scale appears to be broken..."

Everything after 'scale' simply didn't exist.

"It's fine!"

She panicked. It was that simple. She arguably attended one of the best hero school in the country, sat next to punks who could blow up cars with explosive sweat or create anything they wanted from nothing or give the finger to gravity. Her Quirk punched 'screw you' into the laws of biology. She'd thrown punches with psychotic villains and obsessed freaks. But that didn't change the fact she was panicking over something deeply personal, "There ain't nothing wrong with your stupid scale or whatever!" she didn't mean to shout. Or her voice to crack like the last guy she'd kneed in the crotch for insulting Tsu, "It's just my Quirk!" out of desperation, Ryuko slammed her passport onto the counter, "See!?"

Blood rushed through her ears as the immigration agent examined her passport.

Ryuko waited.

And waited.

And waited .

"Oh, my apologies, Miss Matoi, everything appears to be in order," something buzzed when the woman behind the counter slid her passport against something. Ryuko almost didn't look when her name, hero name, picture and some random number appeared on the wall one line of pixels at a time, "Please enjoy your stay."

"Yeah... yeah..."

She almost forgot her passport until the woman cheerfully reminded her she'd left it behind.

The rest of her trip through the airport was mercifully boring. It was pretty much the same as any airport - souvenir shops, fast food and coffee everywhere she looked, advertisements for the upcoming expo, a deafening cacophony disguised as silence and reporters arriving early for the preview. Ryuko took a wide berth of the last

thing. And after one quick visit to the bathroom, she stepped outside and exchanged full-blast air conditioning for tropical heat.

WOOSH!

An unmanned drone flew over the airport, trailing multicolored bubbles that exploded into fireworks, followed by another three in tight formation.

This was I-Island.

A technological paradise renowned throughout the world as *the* place to research Quirks and support items.

"Huuaaaahh..."

She yawned.

"Man, I'm starving," it was alright, Ryuko thought. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. There weren't any psychotic villains. No insane stalkers waiting to ambush her in the bookstore. It was a perfectly normal paradise, "Ugh, but first things first - gotta find the hotel."

"I can help with that."

That voice.

She *knew* that voice.

Pure irritation spread across her face. Her eyebrow twitched. A bead of sweat trickled down her cheek, "Oh my god, as if today didn't suck enough," Ryuko could feel her self-control slipping away. Bit by bit. One drop of blood at a time, "Don't you have someone to mentally scar or something?"

"Is that any way to treat one of your father's closest acquaintances?"

"That's crap."

"But - "

"I *said* that's crap," she interrupted with slightly *more* annoyance, "Because until All Might dropped by unannounced, I didn't even know you existed."

"I'm not surprised. A man doesn't discuss business with his children," completely missing her point - accidentally or otherwise - the exhibitionist's mouth creased into a smirk as they walked past an old man in an obnoxiously bright purple costume using his Quirk to telekinetically manipulate metal rings, squares and triangles for a crowd of young children, "You're going to say that's bull, right?" her silence was loud enough to cut the tension, "But it's the truth," An open-collared black suit. A white undershirt. Open collar. Pressed and measured slacks. Slicked blue hair. No glasses. But he was still the same pervert she'd almost beaten to a pulp with the dull edge of her Quirk, "Every parent keeps secrets from their kids. Isshin wasn't any different."

"Tch, like you know anything about my dad."

She tried walking away, but the moron refused to take the hint, "This from the girl who didn't know Isshin worked at Revocs?"

Her fist clenched, "You want something or what?"

"Actually, yes."

I-Island didn't have natural fauna. The seagulls and birds were imported. The squirrels and other small animals carefully released. One such squirrel, albino white with a dark spot on its forehead, stopped in the middle of the path, a peanut in its paws, squeaked and kept running, "I thought you'd might want to take a look at my speech," the pervert almost seemed upset. Normal. As if he wouldn't strip at the drop of a hat, "Considering how close you and your father were, I'd rather not say anything embarrassing or emotionally devastating."

Ryuko never wanted to punch anybody in the face as much as she wanted to punch him.

"Say whatever you want," but she had enough self-control to not break the perv's nose in front of dozens of witnesses, "You're probably ain't gonna take my advice anyway."

"Cranky, are we?"

Her eyebrow twitched.

That was the final straw.

"Oh, I'm cranky," blood oozed through her skin, glistening bright red in the afternoon sun as it solidified into a blade roughly as long as her forearm, "I'm cranky because some pervert won't stop bugging me," which she immediately shoved beneath his chin, "So, either get to the freaking point..." if she appreciated something about the island, it was the lack of rules against using Quirks in public, "... or we're gonna find out if you can talk without your head."

"Relax, Matoi, I'm just messing with you."

She saw him move, but that wasn't enough time to react before the pervert was whispering into her ear, "The truth is, I'm an undercover agent with the Hero Public Safety Commission on a long-term assignment."

"Like hell I'd believe *that* !" her elbow unceremoniously smashed into his cheek, "If you're gonna screw with me, at least put some goddamn effort into it!"

"Nothing gets by you, huh?"

"So, you admit it's all bullshit!"

"I never said that."

"Then say it!"

"Would that change anything?"

"It *might* make me not want to punch your teeth in!"

"You really are cranky."

"That's it!"

"Whatever you believe, Matoi, is quite frankly irrelevant," the pervert somehow sidestepped her punch at the last moment, leaving her confused and off-balance, "I really was Isshin's friend. And his graduate student. Everything else is open to interpretation," by the time she turned around, Ryuko's knuckles were cracking, "Anyway, you shouldn't stick around your hotel room all day. Have fun. Take a walk. Go to the beach. Try to break the villain course record," but there was nothing she could do but watch Mikisugi walk away, "Oh, you should probably head over to the development studio on the central island."

Her eyes narrowed, "And why would I do that?"

"Who knows?" the exhibitionist stopped long enough to casually shrug, "Maybe you'll find something interesting. Or not."

She didn't know what to say.

Oh, she *knew* what she wanted to say.

But there were too many impressionable and young ears to say what she truly wanted.

Which was why Ryuko decided to say absolutely nothing.

It was the only safe option.

Chapter 41

In hindsight, she should have taken it as a sign everything was about to go pear-shaped.

The fork stopped on the cusp of her lips, close enough to smell the sauce dropping from the medium rare steak. Underneath the large umbrella over the table at the outdoor restaurant near her hotel, Ryuko wondered if her mind was playing tricks on her. It was impossible. But surprise quickly faded into suspicion. Her mood soured. And her dinner, four-eight ounces of medium rare steak with a side of potatoes, slowly cooled as the bastard appeared out of the crowd, standing head and shoulders above everyone else.

"... eh?"

He'd always been tall. The first time she'd met him face-to-face had been anything but face-to-face. Puberty hit him like a ton of bricks. And his Quirk only added fuel to the fire. But that wasn't why she was staring. She was *staring* because of the obnoxiously white business suit struggling to contain his muscles. A suit on the verge of bursting into confetti if he so much as sneezed at anything approaching full power.

An incredibly tacky suit.

"Matoi!?"

The crowd didn't melt around him. He was far too polite and courteous to inconvenience anyone simply because he was built like a freaking tank, "Long time, no see," when he finally reached her table, having excused himself several times along the way, his chin scrapped against the umbrella, "You're looking well. How are you holding up?"

"Fine," eventually, after a pause long enough to be considered insulting, she answered his question, "Would've been nice if I murdered that psycho bitch."

"I heard about that," six and half feet of muscle, discipline and tempered resolve collapsed into a chair meant for someone a third of his weight, "A most formidable opponent," there was a moment where Ryuko expected his chair to shatter, but nothing happened, "But I'm confident you'll eventually prove victorious," a frown almost the inverse of a smile earned her undivided attention, "You might have failed twice, yet each defeat leaves you with more information and experience. No matter how long it might take, eventually you will _."

A clump of gravy-soaked potatoes landed squarely upon Ira Gamagori's jaw.

"Whoops," her thumb was still on the fork, "Finger slipped."

"I'll give you that one," muscles comparable to All Might's folded themselves as mushy food dribbled down a twitching cheek, "But do so again and I won't be so generous."

Ryuko snorted.

"Whatevs," a scoop of potatoes soaked in sauce found its way into her mouth, "Didn't expect to see your ass struttin' down the street like it owned the place," and despite her dinner being interrupted, it was still delicious, "Which reminds me. *Why* are you here?" the silence was stifling even beneath the umbrella, "Tsu didn't send you, did she?"

She expected Gamagori to deny her accusation.

"Of course not," but to his credit, he didn't bat an eye, which sucked. Because he couldn't lie to save his life, "I came here of my own volition. It had nothing to do with you."

"Oh?" she repeated herself, "You gonna tell me *why* you're here?"

"I don't see how that's your business, Matoi," people said she was stubborn, but Gamagori was the human equivalent of a mountain.

Almost nothing could change his mind.

"That so?" he must've known where this was heading, because the moment her hand dipped into her pocket, he tried snatching her phone, "Then you won't mind me telling Tsu *who* broke down my front door."

"That was an accident!"

"Tch, says you."

"You said you'd keep that a secret!"

"Yeah, well, changed my mind," Ryuko waved her phone in front of his face, "Now, you gonna tell me why you're here? Or do I have to call Tsu?"

"I... you... hurrurr..." clearing his throat with a cough loud enough to be mistaken for an earthquake, the third-year from Shiketsu High grimaced, "If you must know, I'm here on behalf of Lady Satsuki. I'm her guest to tomorrow's ceremony highlighting your father's accomplishments in the field of Quirk research."

"Huh - Lady Satsuki?" that wasn't something she'd expected, "She, like, your girlfriend or something? Ugh, Tsu said you were into some weird stuff..."

That vein on Gamagori's forehead pulsed.

"Very funny, Matoi," sounding like he was on the verge of turning into an enraged version of Godzilla, her best friend's cousin began tapping his finger against the table. An incessantly obnoxious tapping that caused everything to move. Including her food, "You seriously don't know who I'm talking about?"

"Why the hell would I?"

She'd known Gamagori since middle school. Tsu's cousin on her mom's side. Dad a pro hero from America, "It ain't like I keep up to date on your love life."

"Lady Satsuki isn't - " Gamagori stumbled mid-clarification, "You're toying with me, aren't you?"

Her fork hit the plate, "I *literally* have no idea who you're talking about."

"Satsuki. Kiryuin," prefacing each word with a noticeably long and desperate pause, as if speaking her full name was tantamount to blasphemy, Gamagori leaned across the table far enough that his face was against the umbrella, "She's here with her mother, Ragyo Kiryuin. You've heard of *her*, haven't you?"

"Kiryuin?"

The name rang enough bells to start its own choir, "Ain't she some hotshot boss or something?" it was impossible *not* knowing Ragyo Kiryuin. Even before the pervert blabbed about her dad working at Revocs, everybody knew about Ragyo Kiryuin. Eerily pale skin, white hair that swallowed a rainbow and statuesque to the point of standing eye-to-eye with Tsu's cousin. And apparently she was Satsuki's mom, which amounted to little more than nothing in her mind, "Alright. Sure. Fine. Why should I care again?"

"Because Ragyo Kiryuin intends on speaking with you before you depart the morning after tomorrow."

Her mouth hung open.

How the *hell* did he know about that?

"Soooo..." oh, she knew exactly how Gamagori learned that piece of information, "Guessing that nonsense about 'Lady Satsuki' or

whatever was a lie," her fork bounced off her plate with a loud *clang*, "Tsu *did* send you here!"

"I'll admit, she might have spoken her feelings on the matter several times," refusing to budge an inch despite being called out on his obvious lie, Gamagori was unfazed, "You're her friend, Matoi. If she came to *me* with her troubles, what does that suggest about you?"

Ryuko didn't know what to say.

She knew *what* to say.

"That I'm a lousy friend," she looked away. There was no convincing him. Or convincing herself, "That's what you want me to say, right?" everyone in Tsu's family was brutally honest to a fault. Her dad *always* complained about traffic. Her mom *always* mentioned if she was eating too much. And Tsu was never afraid to speak her mind, even if the truth would hurt someone's feelings. Tsu's family was weird. Not as weird as Mako's family, which she was pretty confident were super genius criminals based on what Mako said happened over the last few years, "Well, keep waiting," leaning backwards in the chair, she propped a sneaker against the edge of the table, "Because I don't need *you* to tell me what I already know. If Tsu wants to tell me something, she'll tell me. She wouldn't go through *you* ."

"Hmph."

And there it was.

The 'hmph' whenever Gamagori realized he was losing an argument.

"Believe what you want, Matoi, but here's some advice," slouched over the table far enough that his chin was directly above her plate, Gamagori grimaced, "Ragyo Kiryuin is a highly manipulative and intelligent woman. She doesn't do anything without reason. Don't lower your guard around her. Not even for a moment."

"Alright. She's a bitch. Got it."

A huff of air whistled through her smushed cheeks. Ryuko had nothing against him. Never did. He might have a stick up his ass, but he was Tsu's cousin. And the same guy whose first words were 'Thank you' on his hands and knees like he *owed* her something. It had been embarrassing. She'd thought he was mocking her. But he'd meant every word. He was honest to a fault, for better or worse, and a fan of All Might who thought heroes should be upstanding, magnanimous and selfless citizens who needed to do more than arrest criminals. They needed to serve as examples for society to strive towards. That probably explained why he'd gone straight into hero studies as soon as possible. Or so Tsu said. When she first learned about Gamagori, she imagined a larger Tsu. Or someone like her dad.

Not a wall of muscles who inflated the angrier he got.

"Hey, by the way, this Satsuki Kiryuin chick you're a huge fan of," it was hard ignoring the growing *snap-clack* approaching their table, "She has long black hair, right?"

"Indeed, she does."

"Blue eyes?"

"Yes."

She wiggled her fingers over her eyebrows, "Huge caterpillars on her face?"

It wasn't an insult. It hadn't intended on being an insult. Yet Gamagori reacted like she'd slapped a puppy, "I knew your imagination was vivid, but I didn't think you were delusional."

"Oh, really? Because they sure look thick to me."

In however long she'd known Gamagori, Ryuko couldn't remember the last time he'd moved so quickly.

As he stood up - or rather, as he bolted onto his feet like someone lit a fire under his ass - the table almost flipped over. Her dinner made a complete revolution before ending right back where it started. And while the bastard apologized for missing some fancy shindig or wherever he'd been going before deciding to ruin her afternoon, Ryuko took advantage of the opportunity to take a good, hard look at Satsuki Kiryuin. Regal was the first word that came to mind. She would have gone with 'bitch,' but she didn't know Satsuki. And Gamagori wasn't the kind of person to associate with assholes. That didn't stop her from wondering how Satsuki Kiryuin managed to shove an entire stick up her ass and still walk straight.

"Ryuko Matoi."

The slightly older girl's voice was measured almost to the point of practice, "You seem to have quite the opinion of me," she stepped forward, heels clacking and formal attire without any creases, "So, by all means," when she decided to sit, a chair was already waiting, "Speak your mind."

Ryuko didn't flinch.

"Speak my mind, huh?" the crowd in Satsuki Kiryuin's wake had gathered behind Gamagori, "Alright, *Kiryuin*, your eyebrows look like caterpillars and you sound like an ass."

She never expected Satsuki Kiryuin to smirk.

Chapter 42

"Speak my mind, huh?" the crowd in Satsuki Kiryuin's wake had gathered behind Gamagori, "Alright, Kiryuin, your eyebrows look like caterpillars and you sound like an ass."

She never expected Satsuki Kiryuin to smirk.

"Is that so?"

Nothing *great* ever came from someone using those words. Across from the rich bitch who sat down at her table without asking, Ryuko waiting for the inevitable verbal tirade about how she was 'beneath the great Satsuki Kiryuin' or some annoying bullshit. And, of course, a few insults about her dad, Quirk, appearance or whatever. A threat or two. The promise to use her mother's power to crush her. But that smarmy grin threw her off balance. But that was Satsuki Kiryuin. Everyone else reacted normally. There were a couple of gasps. And whispers. That vein on Gamagori's forehead twitched. The world seemed right. Yet the source of her frustration and the reason her appetite faded faster than Mako's attention span whenever Kendo asks how she could be so smart and naïve at the same time kept smiling.

"You must think very highly of yourself, Matoi, to speak to me with such flagrant disrespect."

Tapered eyebrows knitted as the amusement previously adorning the contours of Satsuki's face vanished, "Gamagori..."

Said impenetrable wall of unrelenting muscle immediately moved.

"DISPERSE AT ONCE!"

The intimidating third-year student at Shiketsu High didn't need verbal instructions, not when he'd memorized Lady Satsuki's nuances, minor or otherwise. Stomping counterclockwise until he

faded the crowd, reporters and vacationers and students from the nearby academy drawn by collective curiosity, he puffed out his chest, enlarging an additional foot or two as old-fashioned frustration towards Matoi's rudeness and disrespect recycled itself into far more effective forms, "I SAID MOVE ALONG! NOTHING TO SEE HERE!"

The sheer authority behind the command, legal or otherwise, an excellent question considering Gamagori possessed no actual power, caused the crowd to immediately backpedal.

Ryuko couldn't believe what she saw.

Well, she *could* .

Because it was literally happening.

"Alright," and like that, everything changed, including her interest into the caterpillar-eyebrowed tyrant, "How'd you do it?"

"What do you mean?"

She didn't like the way Satsuki Kiryuin answered with another question, "Him. That," grabbing her fork, Ryuko stabbed the utensil towards the immovable statue, "How'd you get him wrapped around your finger?"

"Nothing."

Nothing wasn't the answer she expected.

Or wanted.

"Nothing? Tch," her tongue clicked against her teeth, "That's a load of crap."

"I'm sorry you're disappointed."

A lengthy pause followed the false apology. It might have sounded genuine, but Ryuko knew when someone was mocking her. Not to

mention the way Satsuki Kiryuin answered really got underneath her skin, "Perhaps you believe I've blackmailed Gamagori into following my commands? Would that satisfy your curiosity?" as she spoke, the sole heiress to the third largest conglomerate in the world leaned backwards and dispassionately crossed her legs, never once breaking eye contact even as her voice developed a bitter coldness, "You expect the world to conform to your limited point of view and behave surprised when it does not. The truth is far simpler - Gamagori stands at my side, not as a subordinate but as an equal, because he respects my ambitions. And I, in turn, admire his determination and unwavering perseverance."

Several seagulls fought over some french-fries.

One screeched.

And Ryuko developed something she'd later realize was indigestion, "Pfft, yeah, like I buy *that* ."

It wasn't that she didn't believe Satsuki Kiryuin's bullshit. Wait. It was because she didn't believe Satsuki Kiryuin bullshit. She'd met a lot of people thanks to her dad. Heroes, a couple of ex-vigilantes. But none of them *ever* gave off the same feeling of arrogant pretentiousness as the thick-eyebrowed bitch acting like she owned everything. Every word coming from Satsuki Kiryuin dripped with condescension. As if she should be honored to be sitting at the same table. It couldn't be money. Yaoyorozu was loaded yet was one of the nicest people she knew. It had to be something else. Something explaining why Gamagori, who *never* listened to anyone outside his immediate family, would slam his forehead against the ground if he thought that would make Satsuki Kiryuin happy.

Slamming her elbow accomplished three things - it scared the seagulls, rattled her plate and earned Satsuki's attention, "No way would Gamagori *ever* listen to someone like *you* ."

There was a moment where she expected Satsuki to say something haughty.

A rebuttal or derisive scoff.

Instead, thick eyebrows relaxed, "Gamagori..."

In the time required for Ryuko's own eyebrows to knit together from frustration, Tsu's cousin melted from the crowd and reformed behind Satsuki Kiryuin.

"A small matter has come to my attention," speaking with a tone no different than discussing the weather or something interesting on television, the heiress's chin turned somewhat upright as the sun was blocked behind more than two hundred pounds of barely contained muscle, "Matoi believes I've manipulated you into following me. That I'm controlling you."

Ryuko's mouth twitched.

This *bitch* .

But she didn't have time to call Satsuki Kiryuin exactly what she was - a bitch - because Gamagori's self-righteousness smashed against her faster than she could blink.

"She does?" he gave her the look. A dirty, disgusted look. Which had absolutely no effect, "Preposterous! I thought better of you, Matoi! I follow Lady Satsuki of my own volition! Her ambition is inspiring! Her strength of will unmatched! I would do anything for her! And she would do anything for me!"

"Yeah... yeah... yeah... whatever, now get out of my face!"

"How dare - "

"How dare I *what* ?" Ryuko interrupted Gamagori before he could repeat the same words she'd heard *every single time* he popped over to Tsu's house, "Blah! Blah! Blah! I'm ungrateful for what I've been given. Blah! Blah! Blah! Undignified and below my station! Blah! Blah! Blah! I miss anything!?"

"Why you- "

"That's enough, Gamagori," it took quite a bit of time, no more than a handful of seconds, for Satsuki's command to penetrate the bubble of anger and frustration circling around her friend's oversized cousin like a typhoon. But it did. And when it did, he reluctantly turned aside and resumed standing guard, leaving Satsuki to subtly gloat, "Are you satisfied?"

"Nope."

Her lips angrily popped together, "For all I know, you're controlling him with a Quirk."

"Don't be ridiculous, Matoi."

The hardness and tempered steel in Satsuki's voice abated into general disdain, "Even if that were true, one doesn't require Quirks to control others. Not when there exist far simpler and legal methods of exerting influence. Money. Power. Information. The right incentive can turn even the most noble of men and women against their allies. Even the heroes which society adores aren't infallible. There is, of course, one exception," manicured fingers interlocked across toned thighs, "All Might. No amount of power or information could sway him from his mission. He's the pinnacle of heroism. He's what every hero strives to emulate, for better or worse."

Ryuko propped a sneaker against the edge of the table, "You ain't a fan?"

"His dedication towards combating society's darkness while casting a brave and assuring smile has inspired more than one person to lay down their lives," leaning backwards, fingers still folded, Satsuki closed her eyes, "Dare I say, this era wouldn't exist without his unfathomable power standing as a bulwark against those seeking to drag the world once more into the cycle of suffering," and when they once more opened, steel blue depths displayed nothing but

determination and modest disgust, "Which is why this peace is nothing but tenuous illusions."

A deep emotion Ryuko couldn't comprehend before the thick-eyebrowed teenager asked a question, "What do you believe will happen once he retires, Matoi?"

"Don't know."

She really didn't know, "Top of my head? Endeavor gets promoted."

"And you think he'll be able to live up to All Might's reputation?" the white suit adorning Satsuki's lithe figure contrasted her black hair, "There's no question Endeavor's track record of solved crimes is excellent. Suppression. Rescue. Evacuation. His agency excels in the three basics of heroism. But effectiveness cannot match against inspiration. When, not if, that day arrives, society won't be ready," a breeze smelling faintly of salt brushed against her face, "Our country's dependence upon All Might will be its downfall. Crime will increase. The darkness he'd driven underground will resurface. And the hero system will shatter as those who rode the wave of All Might's success drown in the depths of how the world works."

"Uuugghh..."

Ryuko wanted to say something, but once Satsuki finished her speech, all she could do was stare at the other girl and grimace, "The hell's wrong with you?"

"Hmph."

A laugh.

"Something funny?" she asked, no, demanded while her foot slid off the table.

Piercing blue eyes met disbelieving sapphire, "Hypothetically speaking, what would you say, Matoi, if I were to offer you a choice?"

"A choice?"

"Yes," beneath the shade of the umbrella, Satsuki Kiryuin closed her eyes, "I'm well aware All Might's former protégé is personally leading the investigation into your father's untimely murder. He's made progress. But his resources are limited. And no matter how much you wish, he cannot dedicate every moment of his time towards a single case," the silence was deafening, "I, however, have access to the entirety of Revocs' worldwide resources. If I were to promise to use those resources with no strings attached, what would you say?"

"I'd tell you to shove it."

Ryuko didn't know whether to curse or snort.

In the end, she did both.

"So, you know, I'm thinking *this*," a hand swept overhead, eventually homing on Satsuki, "Was part of some stupid plan. Gamagori. You. This," Ryuko repeated herself, "I might have fallen for your bullshit. But you overplayed your hand," she growled, "So, thanks but no thanks. Your offer's great and all but I'm gonna have to pass," with that, she stood up, "Good luck or whatever."

By the time Satsuki's expression shifted, Ryuko was already halfway down the street.

It came slowly, piece by piece, eventually settling into ambivalence. As the sun slowly descended over the northwest horizon, the heiress to the Kiryuin fortune craned her head back and stared at the tinted windows reflecting the artificial lake. Matoi's answer resonated in her head. Not the words, but the intent. One could call her obstinate. To have the solution to a problem handed over with no strings attached and refuse without consideration? An ordinary person would find such a decision insulting. But not her. On the contrary, the more she thought about Matoi's nuanced response, the bluntness and directness, the greater the satisfaction she felt.

Her words were chosen carefully to dissuade those with hearing-enhancing Quirks or other means from eavesdropping, "Matoi was significantly less belligerent than you claimed."

"Hmph," Gamagori stood with his back facing Satsuki, determined, more than ever, to dissuade the remaining stragglers from interrupting her train of thought, "Her work-study with the rabbit hero Mirko and her time at UA must have mellowed her out. She used to be far more stubborn and headstrong," as the last few reporters and snooping vacationers seeking to intrude upon Lady Satsuki's well-deserved privacy finally took the hint and dispersed, his brow furrowed, "Although I'm surprised you offered her something so generous."

"It was a test."

The ambient silence was intermittently broken by laughter or shouting or other noises maintaining the cheerful illusion cast over the technological paradise. Her formal Revocs attire felt stifling. A noose around her neck and existence. Not a stitch was out of place. But neither discomfort nor displeasure reached Satsuki's face, "I wanted to know how Matoi would react when offered a solution to her problem."

"Which she rejected," her compatriot's response was predictable.

"Of course," something resembling amusement pulled upon the corners of her lips, "It's what I expected."

"Hmm," the grunt was deeper than thunder, "Does this change anything?"

Satsuki's eyes widened, if only briefly, when something on the breeze turned rancid and foul, "No, nothing's changed," hundreds of tons of glass and metal stood between them. And yet her gaze nevertheless shifted ever-so-slightly towards I-Island's central tower, "Proceed as planned."